

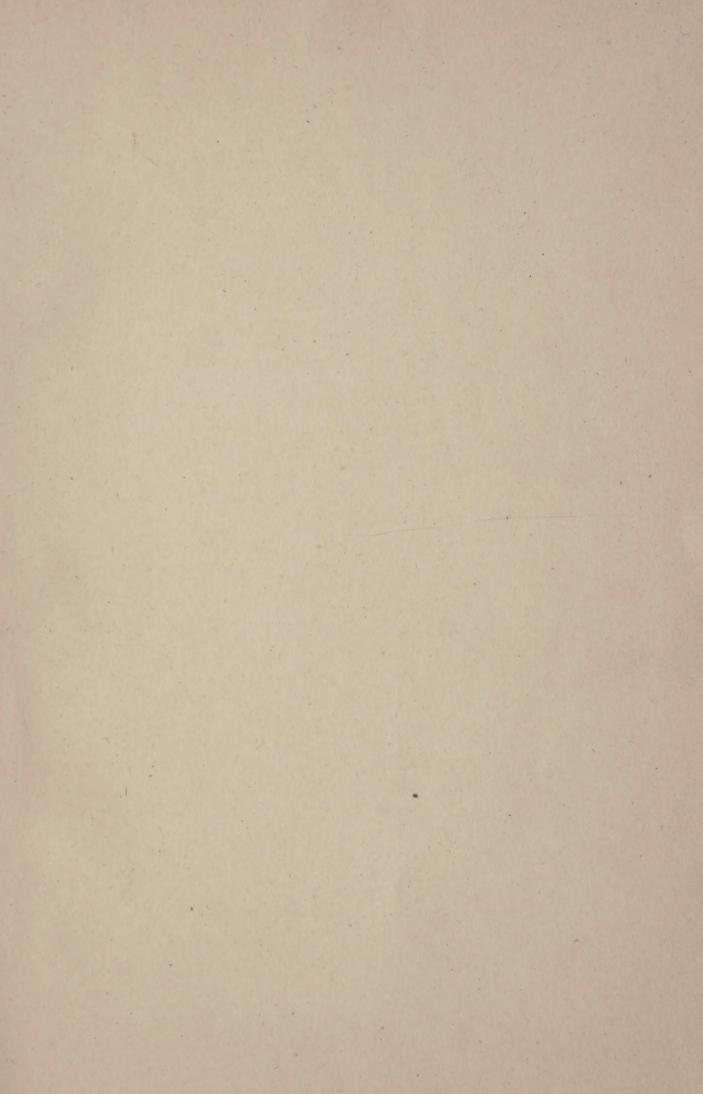


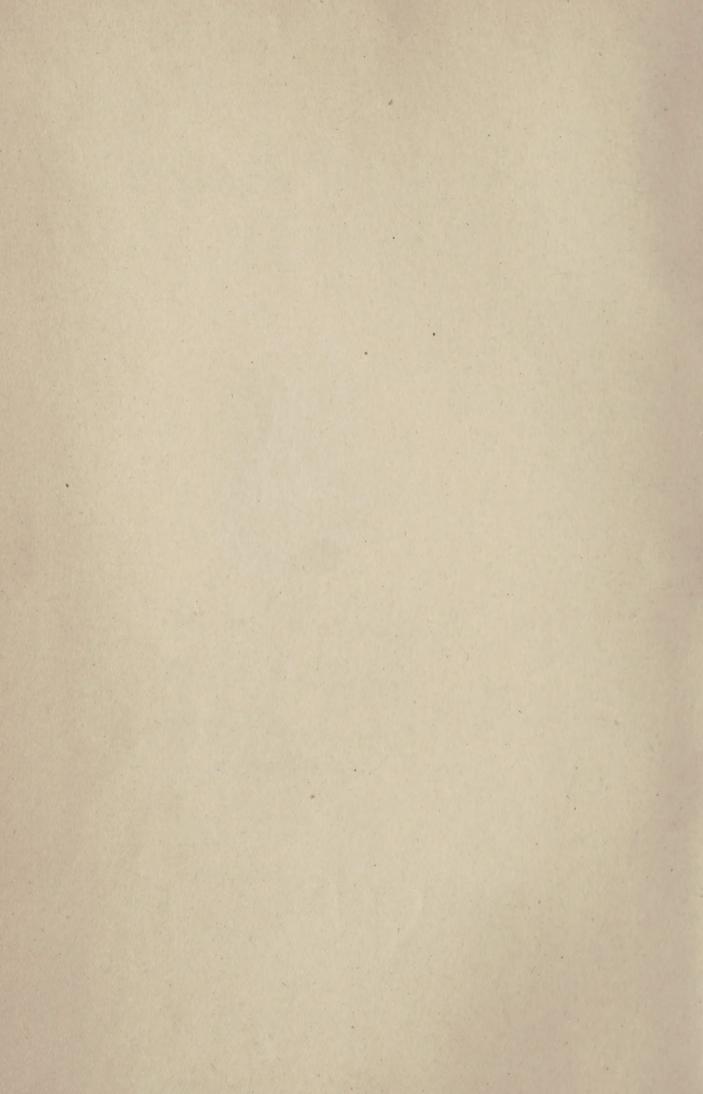
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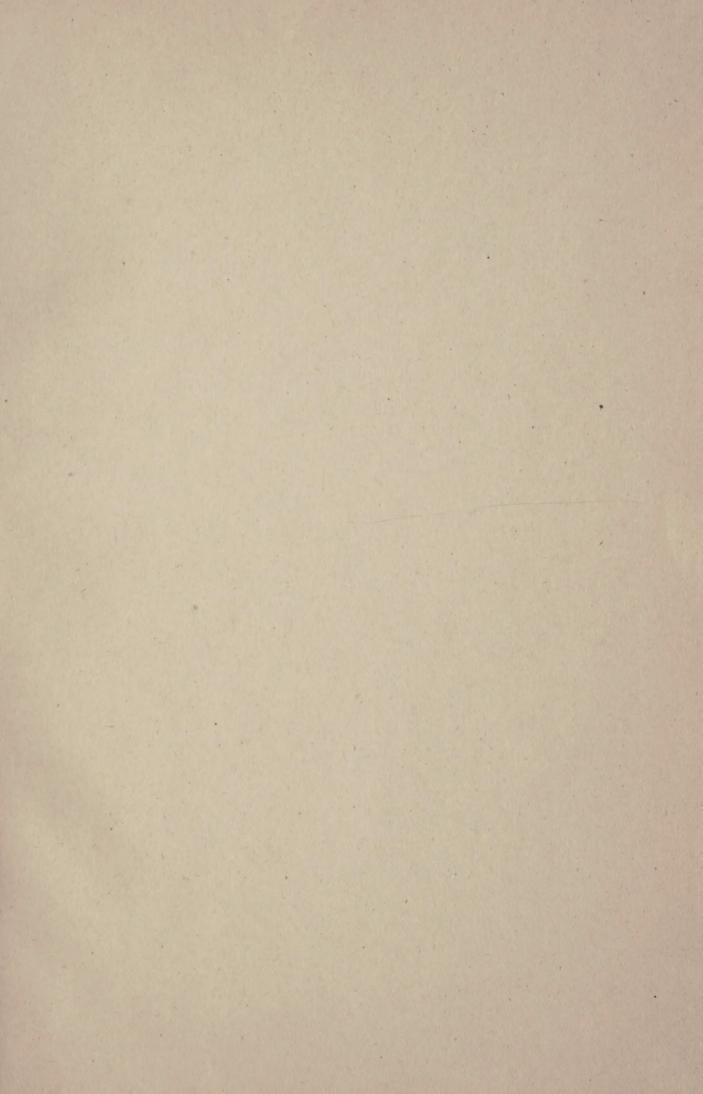
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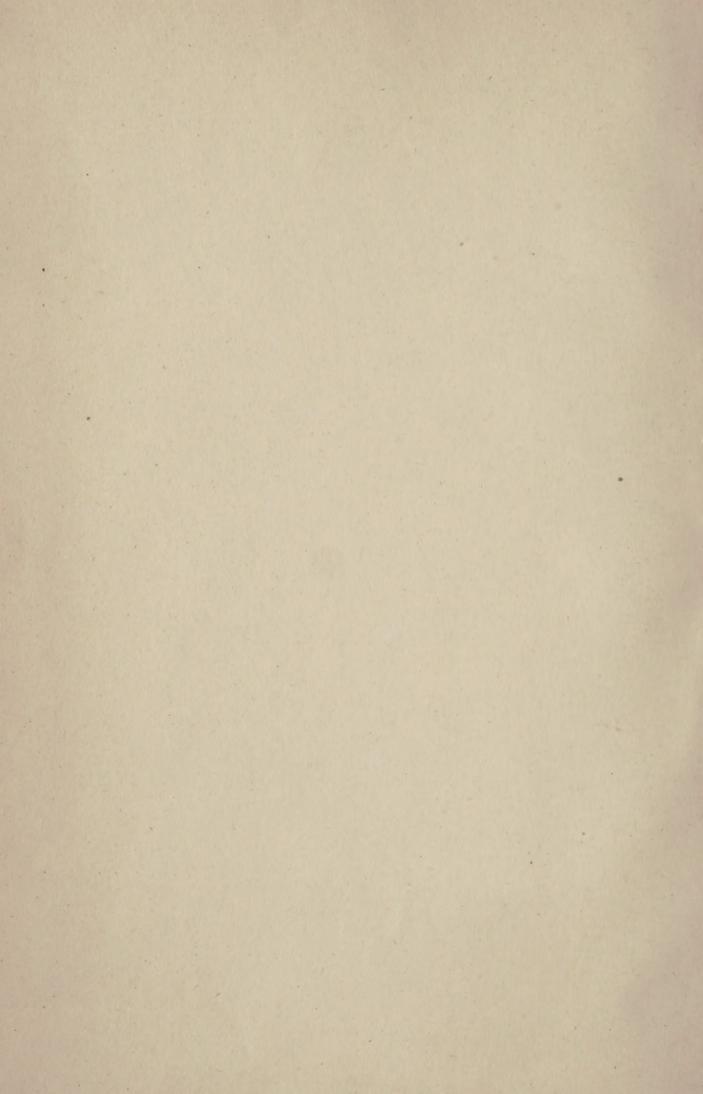
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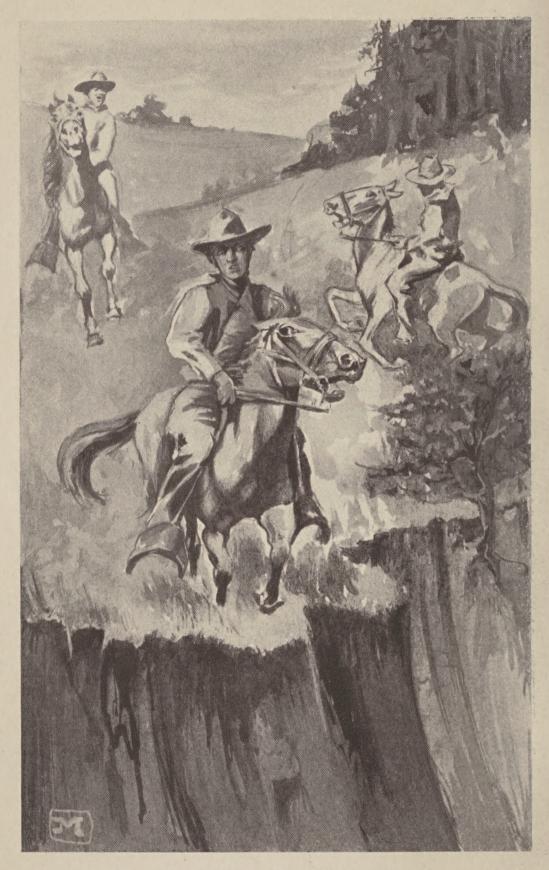












As the horse rose for the final leap, Jean felt the same ecstatic thrill as when he climbed through the fire.

(Jean Carroll.)—P. 57.

JEAN CARROLL

A TALE OF THE OZARK HILLS

814

JOHN HOMER CASE



BROADWAY PUBLISHING CO.

NEW YORK

1911

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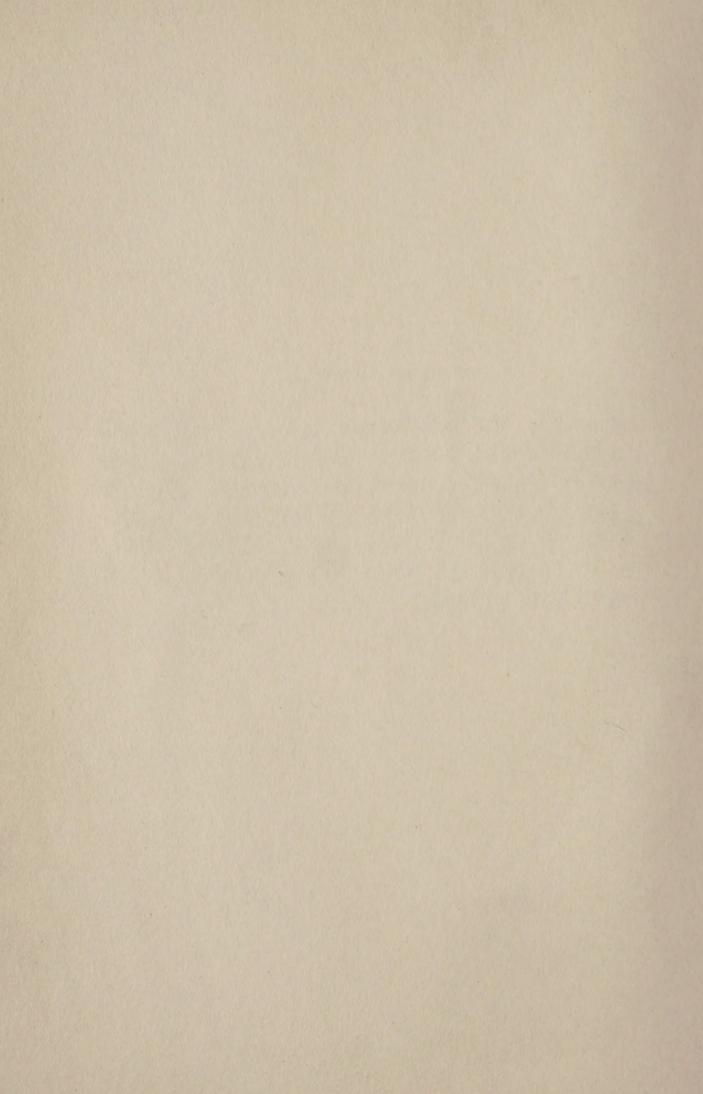
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DEDICATION

TO ALL THOSE WHO HAVE THE RED BLOOD OF LIFE IN THEIR VEINS; WHO LOVE THE WOODS, THE MURMUR OF THE PINES AND THE LAUGHTER OF RUNNING WATER; WHO LOVE A GOOD FIGHT, A FAIR FIELD AND NO FAVORS, THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED.

J. H. C.



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A FOREWORD

Along the southern border of Missouri is a series of broken hills, marked on the maps of the State as the "Ozark Mountains." Near the middle of this border these hills, or mountains, cover nearly three tiers of counties, becoming more narrow toward the east or the west. On the northern edge of this broken country, bending in a great bow from the sunken swamp-lands of the southeast, around north to the level prairies of the southwest part of the State, is a dividing ridge, or crest, of the Ozarks. The counties included within this bow are called the "Hill Counties of Missouri"—a country as different in general make-up from the other parts of the State as if it belonged to another continent.

In early days a traveler from the north, visiting Southern Missouri, would strike this "crest" near Sand Springs, called Fort Sand Springs since the war. Behind him lay the rich, level prairies of the State, dotted with fine farms and thriving villages. To the south lay an hundred miles of the wild and rugged country of the Ozarks—an almost unbroken forest, traversed by numerous streams of sparkling spring water, flowing through narrow but very fertile valleys, these little valleys overshadowed by forest-covered hill lands. These streams find their way

through vale and cañon from north to south, and eventually help to swell the current of the limpid waters of White River.

The "Hill Country" not many years ago was an unknown wilderness; not mountains, but broad tablelands, broken by winding valleys and grassy hill-sides, all covered with magnificent forests of pine and oak. Yet, scattered over these forest lands, giving them a mountainous appearance from a distance, was occasionally seen a tall peak, or "knob," standing alone and apart. These "knobs" arose in massive grandeur hundreds of feet higher than the surrounding country, the lower portion covered with giant forest trees, the tops bald and rugged. When viewed from a distance, the cragged crests, glistening in the sunlight, gave to the scene an air of sublimity.

These "knobs" could be seen for miles around, and served as landmarks and guide-posts to the forest travelers. From the naked appearance of their crests, they were called "bald knobs." Settlers from the smoother counties of the State were wont to speak in a slighting manner of the dwellers among these hills as "Bald-knobbers," a name which, from the acts of a secret organization, became a term of reproach to these honest citizens.

The first settlers of this hill country came from the mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee early in the nineteenth century. They were hunters by profession and descendants of a long line of pioneer hunters. They had been crowded farther and farther from their hunting grounds in their parent

States, until they could stand the loss no longer, but sought better fields in the unsettled lands of the Ozarks. Here, among the beautiful hills, with game of all kinds in abundance, they established their homes.

These settlers came of a hardy, independent race, were used to the hardships of pioneer life, and in a few years had established many thrifty homes. These homes were generally located near one of the numerous springs of the country. Here, with an abundance of timber and water at hand, the settler erected a substantial, if rough, dwelling, cleared up a small field for corn and cotton, and lived a life of pleasure and adventure, for which his habits and training had well fitted him. His possessions were his "claim," a few cows and hogs, perhaps one horse, and last, but not least, his gun and dog.

Few of these settlers were educated, as the world knows the term, but they knew the forest and the animals within it. They knew when the buck shed his horns and the bear sought his den. They were versed in signs and traditions, and knew all the language of the woods and, withal, they were honest, nature-loving, God-fearing people. Yet, here, as in more favored communities, there were leaders—usually men who had seen more of the world; men educated and refined. These men became leaders of neighborhoods, townships or counties, according to their different abilities, and led their followers to the right or wrong, according to their different natures, and where these leaders went their friends followed, faithfully, trustingly and unswervingly.

For many years after the first pioneers came to the Ozark country, settlers came very slowly. Those desiring farms, sought the smooth prairies of the north, instead of the rough hill-lands, and only the hardiest wandered into the timbered sections. Such conditions continued until during the fifties, when the many advantages of the country became better known. Hunters then came because of the abundance of game; stockmen came because of the fine ranges; farmers came because of the fertile valleys; and lovers of nature came because of the beautiful scenery and magnificent forests. Still, as late as the beginning of the Civil War, the country was almost as nature had left it, except along the main streams.

When war was declared between the North and the South the settlers were in an unorganized condition. There were few churches or schools to bind the people together. They knew no politics or party, and each one was left to follow his own will as to which way he should go. The new settler usually followed the action of his native State; and as they had come from both the North and the South, they divided one against the other, the older inhabitants falling into line with one of the sides

as the struggle progressed.

Leaders arose upon either side, gathered their followers into a band, and tried to control the land. Law ceased to exist and might made right. Both sides claimed control of the country, but neither controlled. Undying feuds between friends and between neighborhoods were started—feuds which left a trail of blood across the country's fair name;

feuds which could only end in the annihilation of one of the clans.

Those who were not in the midst of this turmoil often wonder at the continuation of these feuds and factions along the border lines. If they will consider the situation, they will soon understand. Here, as elsewhere where feuds long continue, fell the dividing lines between the North and the South. Here, between these high-spirited men of the woods, were fought some of the hottest battles of the nation. Battles fought, not only between army and army, but between man and man, neighbor and neighbor, and often between brother and brother.

To those of the far North or far South, battles were fought on fields remote. When peace was declared, the soldier returned to his distant home and took up his peaceful avocation amid his late comrades. He thought of the enemy, not as individuals, but as a body. Not so with warriors among the Ozarks. Here the issue was settled man against man, around their own homes. Here civil war existed in its most horrid form. Devastation and ruin followed in its footsteps and left a sorrowing, angry people behind.

While the war was in progress no one was sure of his life. The smith at his forge and the farmer at his plow must be ready for battle at a moment's notice. Men's lives were taken with impunity, and in the extreme heat of passion women were not always spared. Many motherless homes resulted

from the bloody conflict.

But most of these inhuman deeds were the work

of lawless characters, who only wanted such a condition to exist to give excuse to plunder, rob and kill. Yet, so violent was the hatred between the contending forces that the better citizens condoned, even if they did not approve, the murderous acts committed in their favor. They looked upon them

as necessary evils.

Such a condition between nearest neighbors and past friends could but leave scars that would be slow to heal, and nowhere, except in the hearts of liberty-loving Americans, would the breach have closed so long as time lasted. Still, so great is the respect of our people for the rights of others, that as soon as the grief for the lost and murdered relations had become dulled by time, the more reasonable realized that each side, the Blue and the Gray, believed themselves right, that both alike were to blame, and that both should forgive and forget.

The Ozark country was the dividing line between the contending forces west of the Mississippi. Here, within sight of the "bald knobs" in the pine forests, were fought some of the fiercest conflicts of the great struggle. So terrible was this struggle that for years after Lee's surrender and peace was declared, the land was in a chaotic state, and clashes between Northern and Southern sympathizers were almost daily occurrences. To avoid these conflicts each side had their day, or week, in which to go to town, and woe to the man who braved the dangers and trespassed upon the time of his enemy. A good "threshing" was most sure to be the result.

generation of boys, with less cause for quarrels and less heat in their blood, had grown to manhood. With these changed conditions, reason began to predominate; the conservative old men and some of the younger men saw that old feuds were kept alive to enable unprincipled rogues to commit unlawful acts. They found that those men were fighting for

spoil instead of principle.

A movement for better order was started. The growth of the cause was slow. Fifteen years had passed since the war before the "Law and Order" citizens were numerous enough to have controlled the elections. Many more years passed before those who favored "Law and Order" could join together, lay old prejudices aside and elect a "Law and Order" official. The contests came on the election of sheriff, and for many years the man with the suggestive row of notches on his gun stock was sure of election. At last, when a "Law and Order" candidate was elected, he was drawn into a quarrel, shot dead by a "mankiller," and a "tough" took his place, and lawlessness again reigned supreme. These conditions had reached such a state early in the eighties, that law was almost unknown, and life was sacrificed recklessly. Good citizens were in constant terror, when at last some of the best men organized a secret society for mutual protection. Only citizens known to favor law enforcement were admitted to the clan. The organization was non-political and non-sectarian. It had no written rules or laws, but each member, upon admittance, took an oath to deal justly by all men, to assist in law enforcement and

not to divulge the names of members or the acts

of the body.

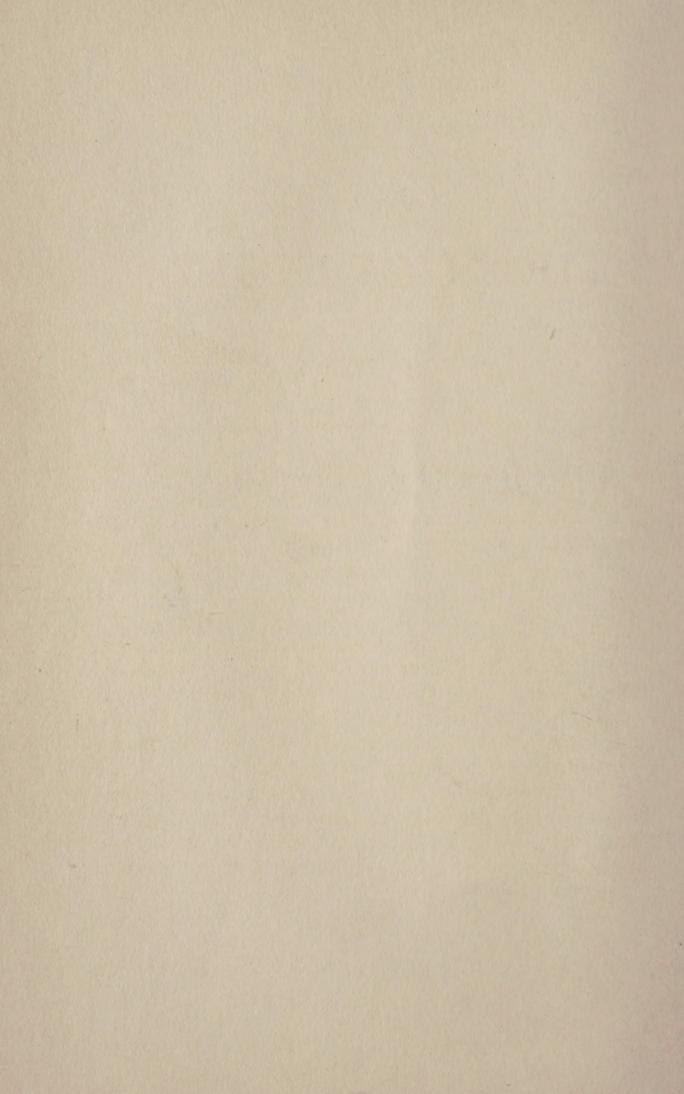
The membership increased rapidly; all fled to the society for protection. It did the works in secret that officials are expected to do in public. It became a dread to evil-doers. It knew no party, no creed; no North, no South. It punished the guilty and protected the weak. In a few years this secret body had done for this fair land what officials had failed to do in a decade, and life and property was again secure.

This society had no settled place of meeting, but selected spots in the roughest parts of the virgin forest to decide on their acts and plans. At its meetings all members wore masks and spoke in disguised tones. All questions were settled by a vote

of those present.

For many years this masked, mysterious body, without place or name, ruled the "Hill Country" of Missouri. The evil-doers knew the strength and dreaded the vengeance of the "Bald-knobbers."

JEAN IS INTRODUCED



JEAN CARROLL

CHAPTER I

JEAN IS INTRODUCED

A BOUT sundown, one day in May, in the early Seventies, the Government stage coach, drawn by six steaming horses, came rolling down the long, sandy hill toward old Fort Sand Springs. The great coach lurched wildly here and there whenever, by chance, the driver allowed one of the heavy wheels to strike a protruding stone. The road was a wide, much-traveled trail, washed deep into the earth here and there, and strewn along the sides with old twisted and warped pieces of iron, broken wagons and scraps of harness, relics of some hasty retreat along this difficult route by one of the contesting armies during the late war.

On either side of the road, stretching as far as the eye could see, extended an oaken forest; green and beautiful close at hand; dark, gloomy and threatening under the dying sunlight in the distant

valleys.

The lengthening shadows were hiding the distant view when the stage entered a small clearing at the foot of the long hill, and with a swerve to the left, a loud "whoa" and grinding of brakes, the coach came to a standstill in front of a long, rambling, one-story building—all that was left of old Fort

Sand Springs.

Tom, the driver, sprang from the seat, threw the heavy lines to the stable boy, the mail to Manse Kissee, storekeeper, postmaster and innkeeper, then turned his attention to the interior of the coach. Only one passenger alighted, a boy apparently about five years old, small for his years, with large blue eyes, black curly hair hanging to his shoulders, and a prominent nose that gave every indication that later it would be decidedly Roman. He timidly followed Tom toward the store where Kissee was sorting the mail and delivering it to a number of rugged farmers, who were standing around "swapping yarns" and spitting tobacco juice at the cracks in the oaken floor.

"Here, Manse, I've brought you a boarder."

"What! You have? 'I'll never stir.' Yessir. Where is he, Tom?"

"Here he is," and Tom gently lifted the boy onto

the high step.

"Who? That shaver thar? Well, 'I'll never stir.'"

A change came over the childish features at the gruff voice of the old postmaster, an unnamable change. The face lost its childish look. The eyes seemed no longer blue. In a low voice he answered,

"I won't go in, if you don't want me. It's warm out here."

"Well, well! 'I'll never stir.' The little beggar's plucky, ain't he, Tom? Come on, sonny, you're all right. Come right on in and mother'll get you some warm milk and bread. Here, Tom, take him in with you to get your supper. He's got the grit all

right."

Manse Kissee turned to his work arranging the mail while Tom and his charge passed into the old-fashioned kitchen and dining room, where Mother Kissee was serving the supper. The loungers about the store watched the old postmaster as the different pieces of mail were examined and freely discussed the probable contents of the few letters. When supper was finished and Tom and the boy again appeared, the old man asked: "Who is the youngster,

Tom, and where's he goin'?"

"His name's Jean Carroll, and he's going to old Jaques Murray's down on Swan Creek. He's the old schoolmaster's grandson. He come up to St. Louis from Orleans with Joe Blander on the Sary Jane. His dad an' mother both died in Orleans of the swamp fever. He's goin' to live with his granddad. I'll tell you what, boys, he's a plucky chap. Hasn't whimpered a note in the whole two hundred-mile trip, an' the road's rough as sin, too. Joe says his dad was a mighty fine man, and a Northern man, too, but I guess old Jaques will make a Democrat out o' the boy. I know he'll try to, 'cause he's a Orleans Democrat, dyed-in-the-wool.'

"Well, 'I'll never stir.' Don't you worry about Jaques makin' a Democrat out o' that chap. If he makes the man he's cut out for, he'll 'tend to his own makin'. 'Shoot me' if the little beggar wasn't goin' to stay out if I hadn't talked soft to him. Yes, sir, that chap'll be all right if he makes as good a man as his old granddad. Old Jaques is all right if he is a Democrat. He's kept his hands to hisself clear through, an' that's more'n lots of both sides have done. Yes, sir! 'I'll never stir!' There's your team, Tom."

"All right, here I go. I'll leave him in your care, Manse. Murray will be here after him to-night or

to-morrow. He knows the boy's coming."

Turning to the boy Tom said: "Good-by, Jean. Be a good boy and a brave man, and don't never shy at a rough road. It takes a rough sea to make a good sailor, and a rough road to make a good driver."

Tom's words fell on good ground. Jean remembered them long afterward and treasured them, first in a literal, and afterward in their broader meaning

—a figurative sense.

The heavy stage lumbered away through the dusk to the southwest, on its last relay toward Springfield, the end of its journey. As the fresh team circled into the main road, they were pushed into a sharp gallop by the keen crack of the long whip and loud command of the driver.

With the leaving of the stage, the store loafers prepared for their departure. They gathered up their small purchases of sugar or coffee, or a small

bundle of gaudy calico, shouldered their long capand-ball rifles, and in companies of twos or threes, left for their cabin homes. Swinging off with long, noiseless strides, they halted at the big spring to take a drink from the old gourd, then left the road by narrow, almost indistinguishable footpaths, some of which wound for miles through the forest to end at last in the small clearing on the settlers' claim.

Jean was petted and warmed by "Mother" Kissee, and then placed in a trundle-bed near the fire, and

was soon fast asleep.

Hours afterward Jaques Murray, a fine specimen of the old Southern gentleman, arrived. He and the old postmaster greeted each other warmly, and, when supper was over, seated themselves by the large open fireplace for a neighborly chat. Although they lived many miles apart, they considered themselves neighbors still.

"Well, Manse, how is business here at the

Springs?"

"Very fair, Jaques; very fair. No cause to complain, but, 'I'll never stir,' if I ain't gettin' awful tired of all this wrangling between the different parties. I'm as good a Republican as any of them, but I say 'equal suffrage to all.' The war's over, and let's let bygones be bygones. They had a regular knockout in Marshfield yesterday. Bad blood and bad whisky."

"Well, that's too bad. I wish they could all look at the war as we do, talk it over in a quiet way, and remain friends all the way through. Our boys

ought to be careful what they say, and your boys ought to be satisfied, now that they've whipped us,

without 'rubbing it in.' "

"That's right, Jaques; that's right. I don't blame your boys for fighting for equal rights. I might stand being whipped, but 'I'll never stir' if they could 'rub it in.' No, sir; 'shoot me' if they could 'rub it in.' How are things down your way, Jaques?"

"Pretty bad, Manse. Some don't seem to know the war's over, and everybody seems to be hunting for trouble. The practice of always carrying firearms makes things lots worse. Our country has a deep wound, which I fear will be slow to heal."

"So it will, Jaques; so it will. It will be awful slow till the old hotheads, like us, are out of the way. Maybe the younger boys, like your grandson, in there, will have more sense. He looks like he would, anyway. 'I'll never stir,' if he ain't a fine-looking chap."

"I'm glad to hear it, Manse. I haven't seen him

since he was very small."

"Is that so? Where's he been all his life?"

"He's been with his parents in Orleans, where they both died. He's the son of my only child, and is my only living descendant, so, you see, I can't help but want him with me. His father was James Carroll, and belonged to a branch of the Virginia Carrolls. He came from the mountains of Tennessee, where his grandfather, John Carroll, located just after the Revolution. That land was held by the Cherokees at that time, and John Carroll mar-

ried the only daughter of old Chief Watumska. So, you see, my grandson has a strain of Indian blood in his veins. Still, I don't know that that hurts him, for I have seen some Indians that far outclassed their white neighbors. The Indian's ideas of friendship, truth and morality are far ahead of ours. Yes; he has Indian blood, and, in fact, the boy is pretty well mixed up all around. His father was English and Indian, and his mother Scotch and French."

"He'll be a fine man if he'll only take the good qualities of all his ancestors," the old postmaster said.

"Yes, Manse; but Nick will be to pay if the bad traits get the upperhand."

The conversation then drifted off to other matters of general interest until a late hour, when Manse showed his guest to his room for the night.

The next morning the old man and the boy bade the postmaster and "Mother" Kissee good-by, and drove away to the southward to their mountain home. The grandfather to read his books and to dream of the days of long ago; the boy to see the wonders of the forest, to learn the secrets of woodcraft, and to grow to manhood among all the freedom and strength of the mountains.

All through the bright spring day they traveled southward, past Patterson's old water-mill on the James, then into deeper woods and across the sparkling Finley at the Finley falls. Soon the forest began to change, the oaks became more dwarfish and occasionally a pine reared its sturdy head above the

neighboring oaks. A few miles farther, and the travelers entered the great pine forest. They stopped at a babbling spring by the roadside to rest the tired horses and drink from its crystal depths. Around them on every side stood the magnificent pines, well apart near at hand, but growing nearer and nearer together in the distance, until the massive trunks seemed to form a solid wall around them, shutting them off from the rest of the world. Overhead the lofty branches formed a great, green canopy, obscuring the rays of the sun. Around them was a solemn stillness, while from above came the everwhispering of the pines—a voice which tells to each the story he wishes most to hear.

The grandfather removed his hat in silent adoration. The child, too awed to speak, clasped the hand of his companion and inclined his ear to the

music of Nature above.

Thus they stood, when from among the trees leaped a splendid young buck. With head high and branching antlers thrown far back, he approached the rivulet. Close behind him two does timidly followed. The horses jingled their harness, the buck stopped, gazed one instant at the intruders, then dashed madly away. At the sight of the deer the old man simply turned his head to watch them. Not so with the child. At the first sight of the game he dropped to the ground, and with the instinct of a hunter secreted himself behind the grass and ferns, and remained so until the animals were well out of sight, and it required much persuasion

on the part of the old man to get the boy to again resume the journey, as he wished to await the com-

ing of more game.

A few miles farther and the road emerged from the forest on the brow of a short, steep ridge. The hills, rugged-sided and forest-capped, extended in a far-reaching curve on either hand, completely inclosing a wide prairie cove. Near the upper end of the valley stood a wooded, grassy knoll with a large sparkling spring bubbling out from the bluff at its foot and winding away down the valley to join the river through the only break in the surrounding hills. In this cove lay the Murray home, the farm lands extending from side to side of the valley and its grazing lands far up the mountain.

On the knoll by the spring stood the farmhouse, while farther down in the edge of the meadow stood the barns and granaries. The road wound down the hill by the farmhouse, along the side of the cove and away through the gap and across the river.

The old man stopped to view the scene before beginning the descent. The dying sunlight from across the valley mellowed the outlines and made of the whole a beautiful picture. In the foreground stood the square farmhouse, with its big stack chimney in the centre, and wide, airy porch at the front. The house nestled among the shade trees and orchards, while immediately below were the barns and lots, with the herds of cattle and horses grazing in the pastures. In the background, through the gap, could be seen the waters of the river reflecting

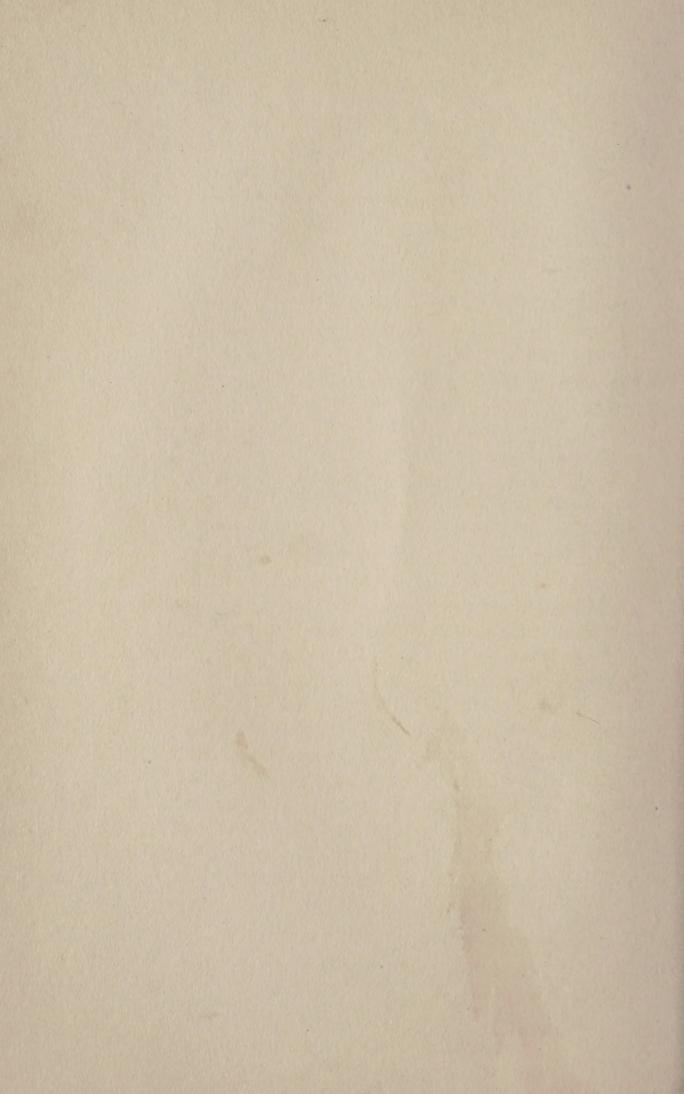
the rays of the fast-sinking sun, while all around, as if a frame for the picture, extended the pine-covered mountains.

The old man broke the silence with: "Jean, my son, this is our home. Do you think you will like it?"

"Yes, grandpa. I like the trees and the hills and the water and the deer, but I like the trees best,"

the boy responded with fervor.

Jean was welcomed home by a sweet little grandmother, who kissed and petted and warmed him, and at last tucked him away in bed in the large south room, where in the morning, and many mornings thereafter, he watched the sun climb the sky over a great pine tree on the mountain top. The sun rising over this tree marked the beginning of the joys of a new day, just as the home-coming marked the beginning a new existence. JEAN'S SCHOOL DAYS



CHAPTER II

JEAN'S SCHOOL DAYS

parents was like that of many other boys on the hill farms—caring for the cattle and colts in the winter, helping the men with the crops through the spring and summer, and three months of school at the old log schoolhouse in the fall, all interspersed with long tramps through the murmuring pines—a life admirably adapted to develop him physically to the fullest perfection and to allow his natural

disposition to mature and become strong.

He had the usual trials of the country boy. In the school he had his friends and his enemies. He was always backward and shy, and this caused those inclined to be overbearing to chaff and torment him, and the teasing was usually taken without a word, but one of the offenders found at last that it could be carried too far. It was on a Monday morning, after Jean had spent the Saturday before hunting in the mountains, that Bud Jones, the acknowledged bully of the school, teased Jean about slipping away alone, accusing him of claiming to hunt while hid about the farm. Jean ignored the taunt, but not so with his friend and admirer, pretty Mollie Ming. She sneered at Bud's speech and accused him of be-

ing afraid to go to the woods alone. An angry flush reddened Bud's face and he retorted:

"Oh, you have to take the part of the doll-baby, do you? Maybe he didn't go alone? Perhaps his

particular lady friend went with him?"

A sudden calm came over the school as Jean faced around. His blue eyes were no longer blue. His nose quivered with passion. His features gradually changed from those of a boy to the hardened features of an angry savage. The whole school stood as if paralyzed with fear and awaited the storm. For a few seconds no one moved, then there was a bound, a blow, and the school bully found himself sprawling on the floor, blood pouring from his crushed lips and nose. Jean, aroused, knew no quitting. Bud had gone down a second time when the teacher arrived, caught Jean by the collar and prepared to chastise him. There was a twist, a pull and a blow from the enraged pupil and the six-foot teacher went down by the side of Bud, while Jean strode from the room and off toward the woods without looking back.

The teacher arose, washed the blood from his face and called school as usual. The children took their places and seemed to study their lessons, but the very quietness of the room told plainer than words that their feelings were being suppressed. The teacher, carefully refraining from criticising the poorly prepared lessons, continued the work until about three o'clock in the afternoon, and the school was beginning to resume its usual condition, when Jean, calm and collected, with all trace of

the morning's passion gone, walked into the room and took his accustomed seat.

Again the uneasy stillness of the forenoon came over the school, as the teacher took down from two nails on the wall a long, tough hickory switch and said: "Jean Carroll, come up to this desk and explain your conduct of this morning."

"I have nothing to explain, sir. I need punishment, and have come back to take whatever you wish to give me," said Jean, advancing to the teach-

er's desk.

"Hold out your hand, then," and the boy's bare fingers were lashed until the girls of the school cried for very pity, yet he never moved nor winced. The training of a long generation of ancestors to endure torture with indifference was having its effect and death itself might come but never a cry for pity.

When school closed, Jean was the hero of the hour. Mollie and the other girls crowded around

him to show their appreciation of his conduct.

"Oh, Jean," said Mollie, "your poor hands. How

did you stand it?"

"I don't mind my hands, Mollie; but I hated to see you girls cry. I wish to-day had never been; please don't say anything more about it," replied

Tean, and quickly turned away.

The fight was not renewed, and scarcely ever mentioned, but it created a faction in the school which remained long after the cause was forgotten, for Bud had his followers and they hated Jean all the more because of the friends he made.

When Jean was fifteen years old and had finished the course taught at the old log schoolhouse, his grandfather urged him to go away to school. Jean loved his mountain home and dreaded to leave his only friends, but Jaques Murray urged so strongly that he consented to go, and a few days later bid good-by to his aged relatives, to his school friends and to the beloved forest, then mounted into the big farm wagon to go to Springfield, where he would take the train for Virginia to enroll as a member of the boy's college, where his father, and his father's father before him, had spent their school days.

At the end of three years Jean was called hurriedly home to find the sweet old grandmother too near death's door to speak his name, but with love and thankfulness in her eyes that she had lived to see her dear boy before her life departed. Jean remained at home only a few days after the funeral, then returned for two more years at the school.

He had made a good record, both at his studies and at play, and would leave school one of the envied ones—a member of the college football team. Thanksgiving day of Jean's last year had arrived. The great football game of the season was to be played. The players were in the field, each man in his place, but in after life the remainder of that day seemed a dream to Jean. As in a vision he could see a vast throng of people watching for the game to begin, eleven men in brown crouched for a spring, ten others and himself in blue guarding a ball. The signal was called, the ball was thrown, he caught it

and ran. There was a rush and scramble and then—something was wrong, an alarm was heard, confusion upon confusion. The crowded grandstand was on fire. The people were rushing from it to the ground. All seemed to be safe and the flames swiftly spread over the tall frame structure, when suddenly a little child was seen high upon the stand, above the flames.

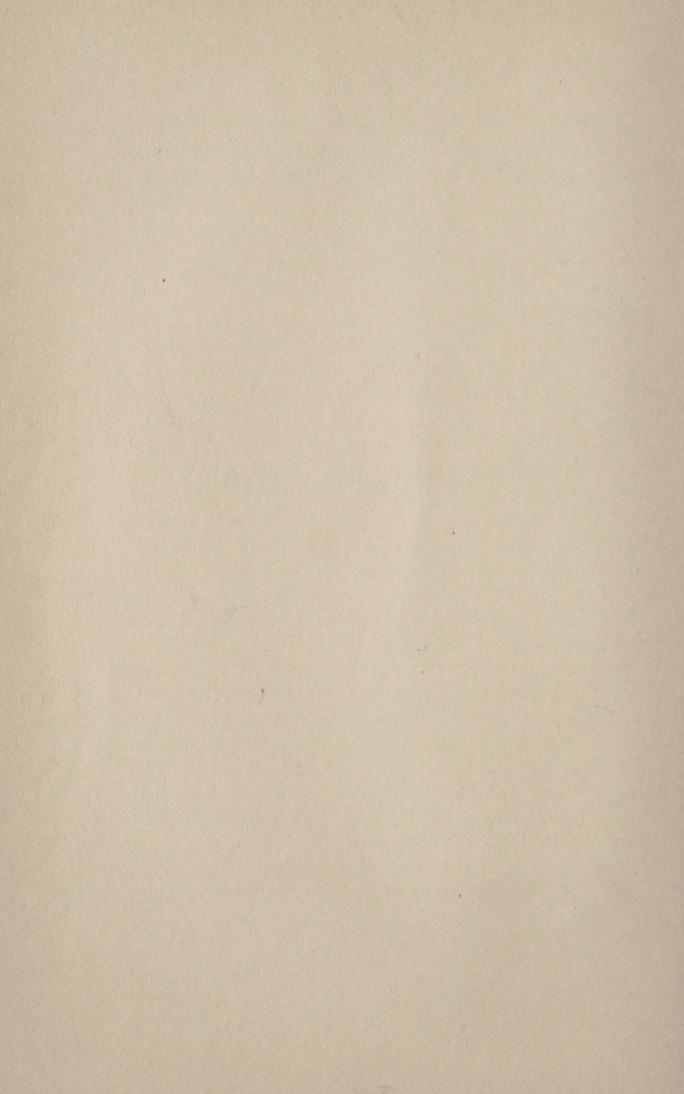
There was a hush on the throng, but not for long. There was a flash of blue and Jean entered the flames. They dashed and struggled, and almost stopped him, but he pushed on. They wrapped and quivered and writhed about him, but Old Watumska's blood was up and would not give back. He passed the fiery blast and reached the child. He slipped off his jacket to shield its form. With the little one in his arms he dashed downward and after a stumbling, burning struggle reached the field, dropped the child safe, but himself tottered and fell to the ground.

Willing hands removed the burning clothing and bathed his face, but he did not move. Then a young girl dropped on her knees by his side and spoke to him. Slowly his eyes opened to see bending over him a young face set with large blue eyes and surrounded with sun-kissed golden hair. He saw the face bend lower and lower, closer and closer, and then—was it a dream—she kissed his parched and burning lips. He heard her say: "You saved my

little cousin." Then he slept again.

Two weeks later he awoke from a severe attack of fever to find that he had been awarded a medal

for performing a brave deed, but no one knew that he held in his memory a picture of far more value a picture of beautiful blue eyes and sun-kissed golden hair. PLANNING JEAN'S WELCOME



CHAPTER III

PLANNING JEAN'S WELCOME

rifteen years have passed since Jean Carroll made the journey from New Orleans to the Ozarks. Fifteen years, in which the trouble-some reconstruction period of the South has passed. Fifteen years, which has greatly reduced the effects of the late war. Fifteen years, in which the business of the country has doubled. Fifteen years of advancement for the country at large; and fifteen years without change for the beautiful bald knobs. Feuds, lawlessness and bloodshed terrorize the land. Tis true, progress is nearing, but the hill country is still untouched.

The St. Louis & San Francisco Railroad has stretched its line from St. Louis to Springfield, and on beyond, marking the northern boundary of the Bald Knob Land. There are rumors of another line to be built from Kansas City to Springfield and on to Memphis, clipping the eastern limits of the hill country. The great State of Missouri is awakening to her possibilities. Commerce is spreading; land prices are advancing. All over the State "war times" have been forgotten or forgiven, except in this one spot—the land of the Bald-knobbers.

Jean Carroll has grown from a wondering boy

to a broad-shouldered man. He has fulfilled the promise of his youth. He stands nearly six feet tall, broad of body and well proportioned, while every movement indicates agility and strength. His features are a study for an artist. All the characteristics of his mixed ancestry are blended together into one strong face. The prominent Roman nose of the Scot, the curly black hair of the French, and the firm-set mouth of the English, while over all the watchfulness of the Indian race is stamped. His eyes are an honest blue in peace, an indescribable hue in passion. Jean has completed his years in college and will soon return to his mountain home.

It was springtime in the Ozarks. Springtime, when the maple buds in the valleys were bursting through their winter blankets and tingeing the treetops a reddish green, while on the hillsides were seen pink clusters of the blooming red bud. It was springtime, and all Nature was singing its voiceless

song of thankfulness.

Near sundown on one of the first warm days of the season, Frank Jackson stopped his horse at the Ming gate in response to an invitation from Mollie, now grown from a curly-haired, round-faced schoolgirl to a pretty young woman, to arrange for a party at which Jean was to be welcomed home. Frank enthusiastically joined in the plans, and it was agreed that, as Jean would arrive on the following Tuesday, the party would be held on Wednesday evening, and that they would meet at Mol-

lie's home, if she could gain the consent of her

parents.

They then began to name the ones to be invited. Frank noticed that the name of Bud Jones had been omitted and asked: "You didn't name Bud Jones; won't you invite him?"

Mollie's voice lost its cheerful tone as she answered: "Yes; I guess we will have to on father's account, they seem such friends; but I hope he won't

come. He's getting worse every day."

It was also decided that they would invite their new neighbors, Mr. Rogers and Ula Dean. At this point they were joined by Mr. Ming and Mollie at once said: "Oh, daddy, we're planning a party in honor of Jean Carroll, and we want to have it here next Wednesday night. We can, can't we?"

"Why, I don't know, Mollie," answered her father with some hesitation. "I like Jean as well as anybody, but I don't see the use of making such a fuss over his coming back. Just have a party with-

out calling it anybody's party."

"No; that won't do. Jean will just have come, and we want to show him we have not forgotten him, and welcome him home. We can have it, can't we?"

"Oh, yes, I guess you can, if your heart's set on it, but be sure and don't slight any of the neighbors. You mustn't make any of our old friends mad."

"We won't, daddy."

Chris Ming walked away with a troubled look on

his face. Mollie and Frank completed the arrangements and Frank rode home through the dusk.

That evening, while sitting about the fireplace before bedtime, Mollie said: "Daddy, why didn't you want us to call it Jean's party?"

"Because, Mollie, I was afraid it might make

some of our old friends mad."

"I know what you mean, daddy. It's Bud Jones, and if he gets mad about my party he's less sense than I thought."

The troubled look again came over Chris' face as he replied. "Mollie, Bud has lots of influence

around here, and we must be friendly to him."

"All right, daddy, I will," she replied; but when she went to her room she could not help wondering why her father was so afraid of offending Bud

Jones.

The day of the party was one of those spring days that make all the world glad. The morning dawned with a silvery mist hanging over the river, shutting out as a screen the distant hill lands, but as the sun arose the mist disappeared, revealing to the eye a glorious landscape. Near at hand the green grass was just beginning to cover the earth that had been blackened by the fires a few weeks before, and between the trees on the hillside could be seen the blue and the delicate white tints of the violets and daisy. In the distance were the forest-clad mountains, broken on the lower parts by ledges of white where the hardy dogwood reared their blooming heads.

Jean had arrived home the evening before, and

this morning, as he stepped out into the glorious sunlight and viewed the beautiful scene, felt with the poet that "there's no place like home." While standing in the yard admiring the landscape that seemed to him never to have looked so beautiful before, Frank Jackson called to him from the gate.

The two old schoolmates shook hands, and Frank told him of the party that Molly Ming was to give in his honor, and asked him if he would come.

"Come! Of course I'll come; but it all seems too good to be true. To think that I am at home again and that my friends have not forgotten me. Come in and take breakfast with me."

"No, Jean, I haven't time, besides I've been to breakfast. I've lots to do to-day inviting all the young folks, so good-by until to-night," and Frank rode on his way, leaving Jean wondering at the

pleasures that were falling to his lot.

By sundown that evening several farm teams, hitched to well-seated wagons, and dozens of saddled horses were tied to the trees in front of the Ming home, and throughout the next hour the guests continued to arrive, until the roomy log house was filled to overflowing with chattering, laughing girls, while the boys lounged about outside, enjoying the pleasant evening breeze and talking and playing pranks on each other.

Frank and Jean arrived at the party together, and the latter was at once surrounded by a throng of friends and for some time was kept busy shaking hands with old acquaintances and making new ones. Among those he met for the first time were the Mc-

Faddens, two brothers and a sister, and Martin Rogers, a young botanist, who made his home with a distant relative, a Mr. Dean, who had purchased the Johnson farm and moved to it a year before. The Johnson farm joined the Murray farm down the river.

After greetings all around, Frank invited the girls out into the moonlight, where, on the smooth, grassy lawn, the evening games were begun, and for several hours pattering feet kept time to the jingling rhymes of Money Musk, Buffalo and other merry songs. But why try to describe the events of the evening, for what pen can convey the thrill of an old-fashioned country party to a happy, healthy boy or girl.

When all were tired with the plays and games, Mollie turned to Frank and said: "Now, Mr. Ringmaster, what next? You are master of cere-

monies."

"I don't know what next. What do you say,

Jean?"

"I don't care. Why not rest awhile and talk; I want to hear all the news since I went away. Why not each one tell something that has happened?"

"Oh, that's the thing," several cried.

"But how'll we decide who'll begin?" asked one. "That's easy enough," said Sam Miller. "We'll all sit down in a circle and blindfold 'Dutchy' Webber and let him touch some one to begin, then go to the right, each taking their turn."

The circle was formed and "Dutchy" was led to the centre, blindfolded, turned around half a

dozen times and released. He stumbled about in

the circle and finally touched Martin Rogers.

Mr. Rogers, although almost a stranger to most of the company, had been received so hospitably that he willingly took the opening part in this, to him, a new game. "Friends," he began, "I have not been with you long and do not know much of the neighborhood news, but I wish to say to your old friend and my new friend, Jean Carroll, that I am agreeably surprised to find so many pleasant people in a country believed by outsiders to be almost wild."

The speaker was cheered for his words, and the turn passed on along the line, each one giving a bit of news, the items ranging from an account of Grandma Cain's old cow dying to the acquisition of a new Baptist preacher in the community. Bert Hawley, always the dullard in school, started the fun when he gave a mournful account of the death of his favorite yellow dog, and the fun kept up as the turns went round.

When it came Mollie Ming's turn she said: "The latest and best news that I know of, Jean, is that Ula Dean has come to this neighborhood."

"And who is this Miss Dean that you think her

coming such good news?" asked Jean.

"She is the daughter of the man who bought the Johnson farm, and so is one of your nearest neighbors. Her mother is sick to-night, or she would have come. She is one of the sweetest girls you ever saw. You will have to see her to appreciate her, but be careful, she already has a sweetheart,"

and Mollie glanced at Mr. Rogers, but that discreet gentleman refused to hear and went on talking with

his neighbor.

The next one to speak was Sam Miller. Sam was a stock dealer in a small way, and in this manner had become well acquainted over the county. He began with: "The others have been giving you the neighborhood news, so I will give you the political news. You know the Republicans used to have it all their own way over the county; now that is all changed. Neither the Republicans nor Democrats control the county now, for the balance of power is held by the Bald-knobbers, and they practically control, not only this county, but the other counties around here."

"Do they still hold to the principles that they began with," asked Jean, "for if they do it must be a

good thing for the county that they control."

"I'm afraid they don't," said Sam. "Still, it is not always safe to say just what you think, and there is one thing certain, it won't pay to fight against them. They have control and run things their own way; those who oppose are apt to get 'threshed."

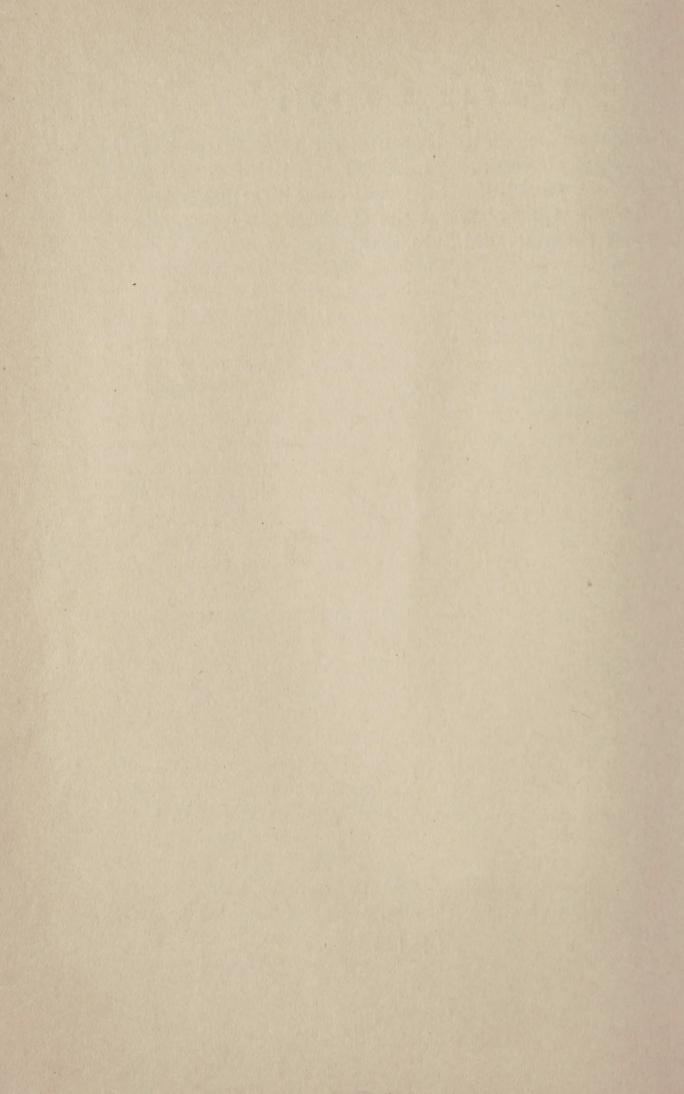
"That may be so, but surely the good people of this county do not let a lot of toughs run things

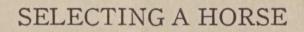
just because they are toughs?" replied Jean.

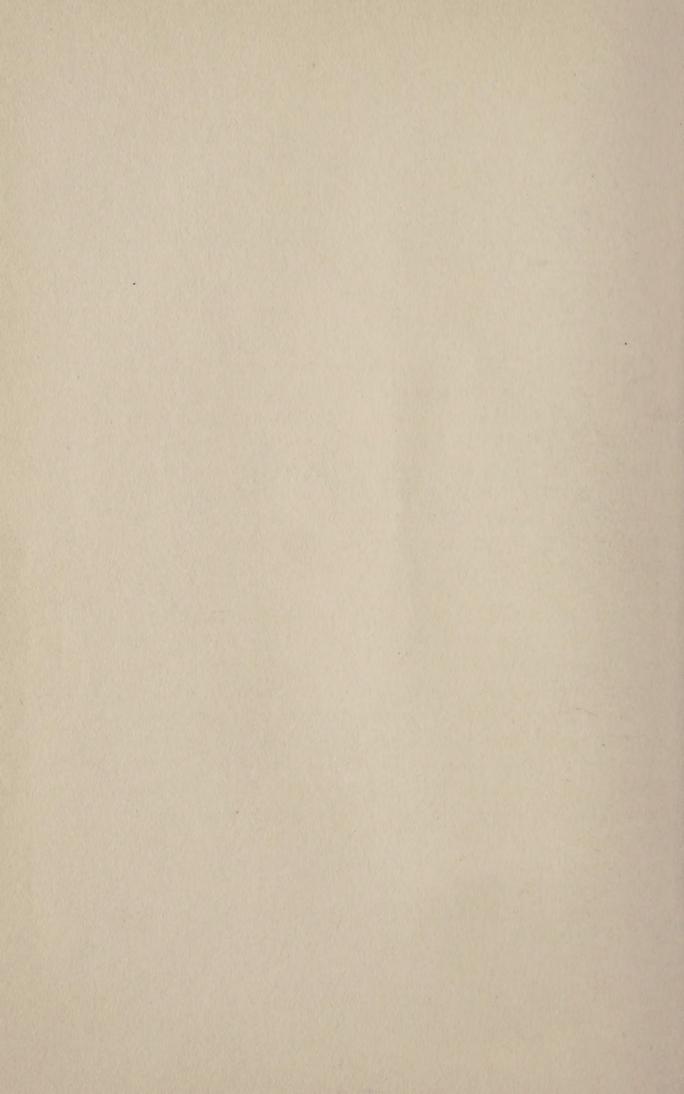
All eyes turned upon Bud Jones, whose face was burning red, but Mollie Ming, with ready tact, called out: "Oh, quit talking dull politics and let's have a game of drop the handkerchief."

An awkward situation was thus averted, and

after a few more lively games the guests departed, thanking Mollie and Frank for a pleasant evening. Before Jean left Mollie cautioned him: "Be careful what you say about the Bald-knobbers; there's lots of them around here."







CHAPTER IV

SELECTING A HORSE

S PRINGTIME in the Ozarks, with the dogwood on the mountainside like of evening sky, the odor of pines and ferns in the forest, and the call of the bluebird and jay from the thickets, greeted Jean as he wandered from mountain to river visiting the favorite haunts of his childhood. After the years of hard study, surrounded by all the innovations of modern civilization in the Eastern city, the freedom of the mountains put new life into his veins. Not a new life, but the old realization of life, a life of action, force and power. It seemed that he never again could get enough of the woods. Every tree, shrub and flower, every animal or bird of the forest, seemed akin to him, and he rejoiced that his duties threw him among such pleasant surroundings. And the people he met—how different from those of the East. None of the stiff formalities of speech and action, but a natural freedom and grace that rested his tired nerves. He had yet to learn of the dread power of that unknown secret organization, the Bald-knobbers.

One morning about a week after the home-

coming Jaques Murray joined Jean on the porch and said: "Jean, will you ride with me to the pasture this morning? I want to show you the horses."

"Nothing will suit me better, grandfather; wait

here while Joe and I saddle the ponies."

The ponies were brought from the barn and they rode down the hill and along the grassy road toward the lower pasture. On the way they met Bud Jones, who spoke to them both, but in a sullen fashion.

When Bud had passed on Jean said: "What is the matter with Bud? Does he still owe me a grudge for

our fight when we were boys?"

"I suppose so, Jean. Bud is of a revengeful disposition and perhaps holds that against you. He has always been gruff with me."

"How is he getting along in the world? He

rides a fine-looking horse."

"Yes, he rides a good horse and seems to prosper in every way; but many wonder how he does it, for he never works."

"Why, how's that?"

"I can't tell you how. All I know is that Bud spends his time riding around the country. Many believe he is connected with the Bald-knobbers. You remember them, the secret clan that was organized to enforce the law. Well, the clan has become almost all-powerful, and from a law-enforcing society it has become a law-breaking one, the scourge of the land. It is believed that Bud is at the head of the clan, and that he levies secret tribute money from well-to-do farmers whom they claim to protect for

money consideration. These farmers prefer to pay rather than to take chances. I cannot state that the clan collects tribute as a fact, but I do know that notices have been served on me to donate to the expenses of the clan or protection will be withheld."

"Why, that is blackmail."

"Yes, it is blackmail, and I did not heed their notices, and I suspect I have suffered some losses for my act. Some of my best cattle mysteriously disappeared last year. Still I have fared much better than some others."

"Has nothing been done to stop such practices?"

"Nothing at all. Others who deplored such conduct have done as I have done—held their tongues—although deeds have been committed around here to make a free man blush for shame. Yet their acts were not always bad. At first they wielded a good influence and crime in the mountains almost ceased, but of late the leaders of the clan have changed until now it is more to be feared than the criminals were before."

"How does the clan work and how do they punish

their victims?" questioned Jean.

"They work altogether in secret and acquire all their knowledge by secret methods, and they use all manner of punishment. Last week Dan Carson, over on Cowskin, was given three hundred lashes for failing to pay a debt. Dan came near dying, but will recover. Several lives have been taken in fights when the one to be punished resisted."

"Who are these Bald-knobbers, grandfather? Do

you know any of them?"

"No, I do not know one, although I suspect several. As I said before, Bud Jones is believed to be a leader, but I do not know. No one knows who they are, except their members. They formerly consisted of only the best men of the county, men who organized for self-protection, but now things have changed. The best men have quit or been crowded down, and the lawless element controls. Like all attempts to take law out of its proper channel, it rebounds and injures those who think to use it."

"This country does not punish for failure to pay debts. Why doesn't Dan Carson sue the clan for damages? He could get it." Jean spoke hotly, for

the thought of such crimes had aroused him.

"No; he could do nothing. The county officers belong to and favor the toughs, and besides Lem may not know who his punishers were, and if he knew and told, his life would probably pay the penalty. It does not pay to oppose the clan."

"And you think this clan gives Bud Jones much

power over the county?"

"Yes; the fear of him gives him prestige. He has gained considerable property in one way and another. He has followed horse racing and been very successful, and now rules things with a lordly hand. Rumor says the county sheriff is owned by him, body and soul. Anyway, the sheriff owes Bud his election, and neither he nor his deputies can be induced to ferret out any of the crimes the clan commits."

They had now reached the pasture gate and, after [52]

passing through, Jean rode on with lowered head. Was this fair land, which seemed so pure and free, dominated by an overbearing spirit like Bud Jones? From the bully of the school had Bud become the bully of the land, to run over and trample down the weak; and who was to curb this power which came from a source unseen, unknown? In the old days the schoolmaster held Bud and his followers in check, now his hands were free and his unknown power seemed more potent than had Bud's fists during school days.

They rode on without speaking, the old man dreaming of successes of the past, the young man striving to catch glimpses of the future and wondering what the result of the unsettled condition of the country would be. When they reached the lower pasture, they found the horses gathered on the bank of the river, a fine herd of hardy trotting and racing stock, for Jaques Murray had brought the love of horses and racing as one of the heritages of his

Southern home.

"Jean," the old man spoke feelingly, "you know how I love my horses. Horses are next to human beings in intelligence, and sometimes far ahead of them in constancy. Here are some of the best horses in all the country, and I want you to learn to love them as I love them. I have brought you down here to look them over and take your choice. Choose which you will have."

Jean thanked him warmly, and rode slowly among the grazing animals and examined them critically. Making a choice was not an easy matter. All were

good, but there was one easily recognized as a leader, and Jean's attention was directed to him. He was a dark-red bay, four years old, smooth of body and strong of limb. Unlike the rest of the herd, he did not continue grazing while Jean rode around them, but with head uplifted was ever on the alert.

"Grandfather, I'll choose the red bay with the

long mane," spoke Jean.

"A good horse, Jean. A good horse, but hard to manage. The farm hands have not been able to do anything with him. He will be a fine horse when conquered, but will be hard to conquer. Well, he's yours. Handle him as you like," saying which the old man turned toward the house.

Jean drove the horses to the barn and had fastened the startled bay in a stall when Frank Jackson and Sam Miller rode up to the gate on their

way to the store and post office.

"Hello, Jean, what're you doin'?" called Frank.

"Getting ready to break in a new horse grandfather gave me," Jean replied with a friendly wave of the hand. "Won't you come in and help?"

"Yes, if Sam will. What do you say, Sam?"

"Yes, I'll help," was the reply, and the two dismounted and entered the lot, when Sam asked: "What kind of a horse is he, Jean? A runner, I hope, for you'll need him when Bud Jones gets after you. He claims Mollie Ming."

"I'm not interfering with Bud Jones," Jean re-plied without turning his head. "I've come home to stay and want to get along with everybody."

"You'll have to play puppy to Bud or have him

to fight, and he's counted the best man in the county."

"Bud can keep the honor as for me. How do you fix this saddle, Frank? It's been a long time since I rode horseback," and Jean changed the conversa-

tion which was becoming distasteful to him.

Frank quickly began to assist him, saying: "Roll up this wagon sheet and tie it across the horn—it'll keep you from being pulled forward—then arrange to tie the stirrups together. Now, that's all right; where's the horse?"

"He's here in the barn."

Jean walked into the barn with a strong halter in his hand. A few moments later he led the magnificent animal out. The horse hardly pulled at the rein, but viewed the boys with wondering, fright-

ened eyes.

Preparations were at once begun for saddling the now quivering animal. All worked in breathless silence. Frank held the rein, Sam stood by with bridle and saddle near, ready to hand to Jean as needed. Grandfather Murray climbed the high rail

fence and awaited developments.

Just as Jean was moving up to place the bridle on the horse, Bud Jones came riding back down the road, saw the boys at work and rode into the lot. He was invited to join in the horse-breaking, but declined, giving the excuse that he did not have time; still he remained in the lot and kept slapping his leg with his long riding whip and talking in a loud voice, making the saddling of the now frightened horse much more difficult.

Jean again approached the horse, moving slowly along the halter rein, talking to him in gentle tones, and adroitly slipped the bits between his teeth and the reins over his head. Sam quickly passed the saddle forward, and with slow, almost noiseless, movements this was laid on the quivering back. The horse seemed startled into submission, seemed bereft of the power to move; but this stillness boded no good. They all realized it as only the calm before the storm. The girths were gently fastened, and then, at a sign, Frank loosed the halter rein as Jean pulled the girths to the last notch and sprang into the saddle.

There was a moment of intense stillness as the now thoroughly frightened horse seemed sinking into the earth, then with a bound, as if shot from a catapult, the enraged animal sprang into the air, came down with head on breast, feet bunched, and commenced a wild, leaping, pitching race away across the meadow. Such pitching was what tried the rider's mettle and woe to the one who became frightened, or whose saddle contained a weak point.

Jean was not accustomed to riding while away at school, but as a boy had often helped break the colts, and all his life had taken vigorous exercise. He kept his seat, although the animal gave him some severe jerks, doing everything in its power to dislodge him. Jean watched every chance to check the speed, sitting loosely in the saddle and striving to keep a perfect balance, but sit as he would, the long leaps of the heavy horse had soon jolted the blood from his nose.

At the first lunge, Sam and Frank mounted their own horses and followed the rider and maddened horse as they tore along toward the lower pasture, assisting the rider by keeping the horse away from

fences and the rougher parts of the field.

The plunging horse soon reached the lower meadow, and was nearing the almost perpendicular bluff which overhung the "Round Hole," a deep pond in the river, when Jean called out: "Turn him, boys; don't let him hit the bluff. He's almost conquered."

With whip and spur the two boys wheeled around between the now foaming horse and the river bank, and had almost turned him, when Bud Jones, who had followed the race, rode straight at Jean's horse, reached his side and gave him a sharp cut with his

whip.

Jean saw the blow, but had no time to prevent its effect. The frenzied animal sprang into the air, struck Sam's horse in the descent, knocking him to his knees, and the next leap had reached the bluff's edge. The horse saw his danger, but had no power to stop himself, his momentum was carrying him directly ahead. Horse and rider rose again and shot into the air and disappeared over the bluff,

Jean knew the consequences when he saw the descent of the whip. Instantly he formed his plan: the horse must leap straight out and down to the deep water. Failure meant certain death on the rocky ledge. He set his teeth, gathered the reins, and guided the horse straight ahead. As the horse rose for the final leap, Jean felt the same ecstatic

thrill as when he climbed through the fire. He felt the rush of the air upward as horse and rider went swiftly down through the twenty feet of space, then there was a splash as they both were buried deep under the foaming water. Jean felt a choking sensation, but the horse came to the surface with him still in the saddle, and struck out for the opposite bank.

When Frank and Sam had hurried around the bluff and down the hill they found Jean riding the now well-broken horse along the shady river road.

"Jean, what made the horse take such a spell?"

said Sam. "He seemed to go wild."

"He must have become frightened at Bud Jones,"

Frank added. "Bud rode too close to him."

"I think that was it, Frank," said Jean, his heart too full of anger and hate to speak of Bud's act. "Well, Sam, now that he's broken, what do you think of him?"

"Think of him! I think he's the finest horse I ever saw. He ought to run well from his build, and the way he can buck, but he gave you a close call. I thought it was all over with you."

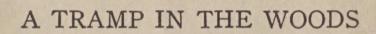
"I thought so, too," said Frank; "but he didn't hurt you, after all. What are you going to name

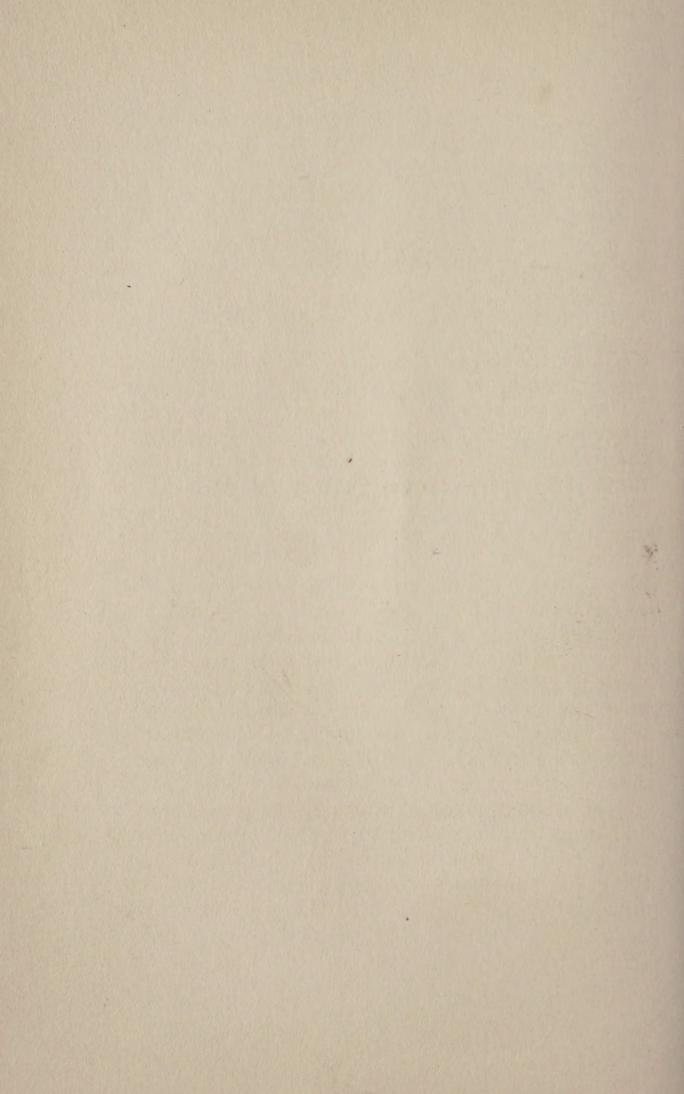
him, the Flying Dutchman? He tried to fly."

"No; I thought I'd call him Red, he's such a

bright red bay," said Jean.

"Yes, Red is all right; but I'd add a little to that. I'd call him Red Buck," and Red Buck remained his name.





CHAPTER V

A TRAMP IN THE WOODS

THE next morning after the horse-breaking, Jean arose early from a sleepless bed, shouldered his rifle and stole away to the forest. He crossed the hill and struck for the densest part of the woodland. The whole night had been one continued struggle to forget Bud Jones' act, and the morning had found the deed unforgotten. It drove everything else from his mind. He forgot the care of the horses. Forgot that he had promised Sam Miller that he would ride to the store with him. Forgot everything except that Bud Jones had wronged him. In the soul of the wanderer was being fought the battle of his dual nature—the spirit of his Christian ancestors which taught "Love your enemies; do good to them which hate you," was arrayed against the creed of his chieftain grandfather, "Love your friends; smite your enemies"—and the result was yet unsettled.

Jean walked on and on through the forest, slowly and silently, like an Indian hunter stalking game. He tried to forget; tried to turn his attention to things of the woods, but his feelings would not down. The cowardly act of Bud Jones kept crowd-

ing itself to the front, and the battle for the mastery

waged on.

Noon came, but hunger was not felt. The bright sunshine of the forenoon gave way to a threatening cloud from the southwest, but the silent walker did not change his course. A drop of rain, then a patter of large drops and the storm burst forth with all its fury, but Jean heeded it not. No outward chill could cool the raging heat within his brain, nor outward storm compare with the raging tempest within. All the demons of unknown generations of savage warriors held his soul and demanded of him revenge on his enemies.

The storm had passed and left a dripping and sodden forest. Now Nature was taking on a more peaceful mood. The song birds began to twitter. A covey of quail, startled by the hunter, whirred across the valley. A great bald eagle, that had topped the clouds to evade the storm, was slowly circling in long, graceful curves toward the earth. Jean stopped, stood a moment, then seated himself on an uprooted tree, a relic of the storm just passed. A quiet moment, then a pleasant smile replaced the dark frown of an hour before. The Christian traits

had conquered—Bud Jones could live.

Low in the west the sun burst out from the last remnants of the storm clouds. All was quiet and

beautiful again.

Jean sat for some time thinking over his past life and of his surroundings and his future, of the dimly remembered parents in the almost forgotten Southern city, of the long stage ride with Tom, of the

school days while on the farm and his love of the woods, of his friendship with pretty Mollie Ming, and the boyhood fight with Bud Jones. He went over the years in the Virginia college. How he studied to become wiser and better, until he had believed that his ungovernable passions had all passed away. But this day had taught him a new lesson. He now realized that dispositions are gifts from ancestors and, while they may be lulled to sleep, cannot be killed. They only sleep to return with all their former strength when awakened.

He thought of the games of college football, and of the fire and how he climbed through the flames, regardless of pain, and now, for the first time, realized that he owed his power to do or die to the same spirit that a few hours before had called so loudly for the destruction of his enemy. He was learning the greatest lesson of life, "Know thyself," and he arose, no longer a boy, but a man. A man with recognized passions; passions which needed constant watching and controlling, but which were not altogether bad, but a power when controlled.

Then he remembered the sweet blue eyes and golden hair that were bending over him after the fire, and he wondered if the soul behind those eyes

was as pure as the eyes were blue.

He awoke from his reverie and looked around to see where he was. Down to the east was a deep, steep valley, with a sparkling creek winding between its stony banks.

"Well, I'm getting away from home sure. That creek's Cowskin, and the knob over there is Lone-

tree Mountain. Hunter Jack must live down here to the right; I'll go down by the cabin and see him. But won't he grin when he sees me so far from home without game?" With these words Jean strode down the hill, whistling a lively tune. All the desire to steal through the woods like a hunter had passed.

Jack Trentham was a hunter of the old school. He had come into the mountains from no one knew

where.

He never talked about his former life. All that was known of him was that he was a kind old man, who lived in his little cabin under the hill, all alone, and kept his own counsel. He had no occupation except "huntin" an fishin". He was an expert in the art of getting game, and his knowledge of the ways of the denizens of the forest was proverbial. But few knew his real name, as he was known the

country over as Hunter Jack.

Hunter Jack was tall and slim, with a decided stoop to his shoulders, a habit contracted while stooping and stalking game. His dress was always the same: brown homespun pants fastened with a leather cow-bell strap for a belt, a heavy brown linsey shirt, with a large pocket on the left breast, a long brown jean coat, with sleeves that reached only a little below the elbows, strong cowhide boots and a coonskin cap. This completed the outfit, if we except the long squirrel rifle and shot-pouch, with knife and powder-horn attached, which was always carried and seemed a part of him. Hunter's only companion was a dog. He never owned but

one at a time, and this was always of the yellow variety, gaunt and hungry-looking, not from want of food, but from hard service. The old hunter lived in a little mud-daubed cabin on the breaks of Cowskin. He rarely visited with any of the nearby farmers, but always seemed pleased when any of them stopped with him.

On the evening of Jean's tramp through the woods, Hunter Jack was sitting in his cabin door when he heard a stone roll on the hillside at the same instant Old Rule raised his head and growled.

"Down, Rule, down!" commanded Jack, "that's a friend. Enemies use more care in their approach."

"Hello, friend! Well, I'll swan, if it ain't Jean Carroll, grown up to be a man. Come in, Jean, and dry yourself at the fire. Tell me how it is with you. Why, you've got one of them new-fangled guns, haven't you? Whar's your game?"

"Haven't any, Uncle Jack," laughed Jean.

"Haven't had very good luck to-day."

"You sure hain't, and to-day's been a fine day. Deer all lying on the North hillside. Would have gone out myself, but there's no sale for them now."

"Well, I didn't find any. I guess I went at it

wrong."

"You can't follow the woods with your thoughts in town. Are you wishin' you was back to the big school ag'in?"

"No, Uncle Jack; I've come home to stay; but I didn't feel just like hunting to-day. I'm bothered."

"Bothered about what? It shorely ain't a girl? With your good health and friendly ways you

oughtn't to bother about a girl. When I shoot at a buck I try to kill; but I know he's not the only one in the woods."

"It's not a girl that bothers me; but a girl may be the cause," and Jean hesitated as though selecting his words. "I am bothered about the Baldknobbers. Not that they have done anything to me, but I am afraid they are going to cause lots of trouble."

"Jean, they're wolves—low, sneaking wolves," and the hunter's eyes lit up with anger. "A wolf never fights without they're in a drove an' hungry; but sometimes they fight mean. I never bother a pack of wolves as long as they let me alone, but when they make a break, then I just cut hell out of them, and I just keep after them, picking off one at a time, till I get the bunch. That's the only way to do the clan."

"What do you know about the Bald-knobbers, uncle?"

"Don't know much. I know I've seen them several times riding through the woods, but they've never bothered me and I never bother them, but they seem to be gettin' hungry, and somebody may have to get some of them."

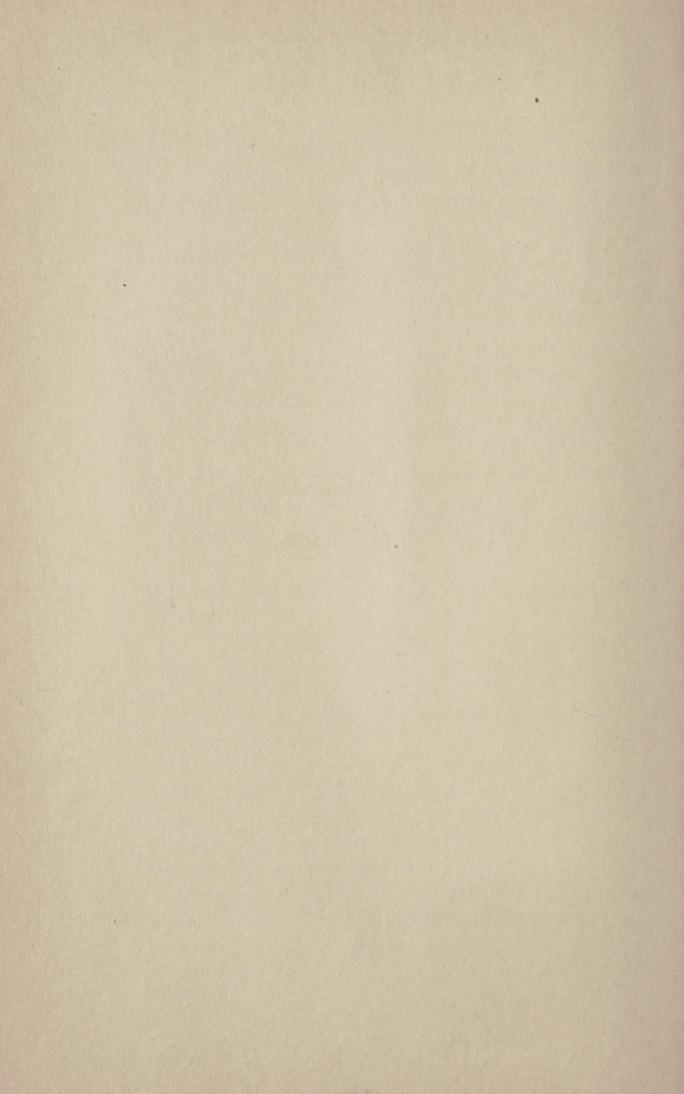
"Where is their meeting place now?"

"I don't know. The last time I saw them they was over by the Johnson farm, near Dead Man's Cave. Say, thar's something funny about that cave. I was passin' thar one day and I tramped up close to the edge and a big chunk of dirt fell in. I just stayed out by holdin' onto a limb. Then I went on

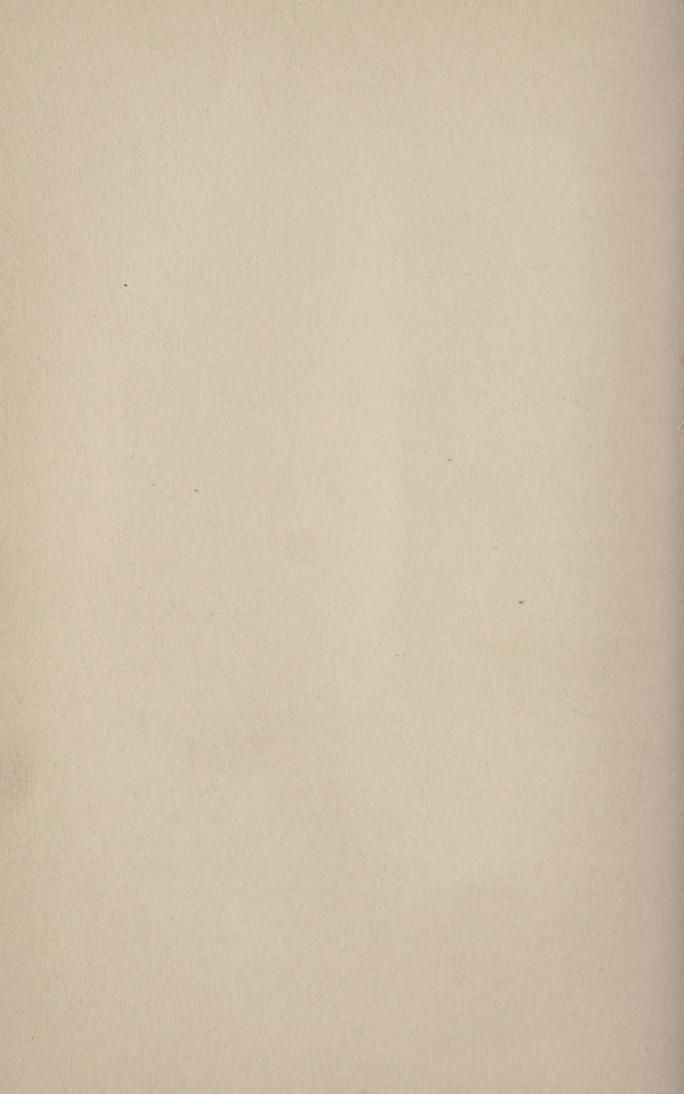
down to the Johnson spring to get a drink, and the spring was boiling up muddy water. I believe that cave reaches to the Johnson spring stream. Now, Jean, sit up to supper. A hunter needs to eat if he don't kill."

An hour later Jean left for home. When within a few miles of the valley, while traveling a dim old trail through the pine forest, he met four horsemen. They were speaking in low tones and riding in single file. All wore black masks. At the sight of Jean they wheeled their horses and galloped away through the woods. They were the Bald-knobbers of the Ozarks returning from the execution of some order of the clan.

When daylight came, Joe found Jean at the barn caring for the horses, and supposed he had gotten to bed early as he was up so soon in the morning.



THE BARN-RAISING



CHAPTER VI

THE BARN-RAISING

"I EAN, Mr. McFadden sent me to invite you to a barn-raising at his farm next Saturday, with a party at night," called Bert Hawley from the road near where Jean was at work. "Will you come?"

"Yes, Bert; tell Mr. McFadden I'll be there."

James McFadden was an Ohio farmer who had purchased and moved to a large tract of land down the river a few months before. He had proven himself an energetic man and a kind neighbor, and was well liked by all who knew him. His family consisted of two sons and one daughter, all grown and lively young people. They were therefore counted a valuable addition to the neighborhood.

An invitation to a working, in the Ozarks, is the same as a command. Such an invitation not accepted would be considered an open insult, and would subject the one who refused, without some good excuse, to the contempt of his neighbors. Mr. McFadden had planned to hire men to raise the large barn, but the neighbor boys had insisted on having the working and a party, and he accepted their plan to follow the rules of his adopted home. The barn to be raised was a large one and, as no

one was to be slighted for miles around, there was

sure to be a big crowd present.

On the morning of the "raising" Jean saddled Red Buck and rode down to the McFadden farm. There he found many of the neighbors had already gathered, while others continued to come until nearly the whole countryside was present. In addition to the men and boys for the barn raising, all the girls of the neighborhood had been invited to help cook and serve the dinner and supper, and to enjoy the party at night.

Jean joined the group of men standing around waiting for the work to begin, and, as nearly all were old friends, or acquaintances, many of whom he had not seen since his return, he was kept busy shaking hands and greeting his old neighbors.

The barn to be raised was not an ordinary log barn, such as the men present had been accustomed to, but a great mortised frame, made from squared logs and pinned together into four large bents, which formed the framing for the four walls. The sills were already in place on the foundation, and the work to be done was to raise these heavy bents to their place and fasten them securely together at the corners.

As the work was new to most of the men, there was much discussion as to the best methods to be used, and speculation as to the weight of the frames and the strength necessary to handle them. This led to stories of feats of strength and boasts of former prowess by the older men. In the bald-knob

land, physical strength went far toward establishing

one's standing in the community.

From stories of feats of strength the conversation led to the discussion of the relative strength of the rising generation, and some of the younger men, ambitious to make a reputation that would be talked of when they were old, began to lift at some of the smaller timbers. These lifts were made more interesting by the presence of the country lasses, who were watching from the kitchen window, nearby, and were not neglecting a chance to see some favored swain distinguish himself.

As stated before, the barn was now in the form of four large bents. The end bents were forty feet long and sixteen feet high; the side bents were of the same height, but were sixty feet long. In addition to these heavy frames, there were hewed logs, one foot square and thirty feet long, for central

sills.

The lifting tests began with one end of these sills and began to attract attention when Frank Jackson walked out to the middle of the sill, laid off his coat, grasped the heavy timber firmly on each side, and slowly raised it from the ground. He felt himself well paid when he heard the hearty hand-clapping from the kitchen.

Frank's success induced Bert Hawley to join the contestants. Bert was of German descent, heavily built, but of a grotesque shape. A very small head topped off an immensely large neck, which was supported by a long, broad back and short, squatty legs.

To complete the strangely curious figure, from the shoulders hung a pair of arms wholly out of proportion to the rest of his body. While other men's hands, hanging by their sides, touch their hips, his almost reached his knees, giving him a clumsy, apelike appearance.

Bert walked up to the log and lifted it with apparent ease. The applause not coming to suit him, he looked around for "other worlds to conquer." The next piece, in weight, to the sill was the forty-foot end bent. Bert approached this, looked it over,

and, noting its size, started away.

Bud Jones, who with the other men was watching the lifting, said:

"What, Bert, are you afraid to try it?" "I'll try it if you will," Bert retorted.

"Oh, I'm not lifting with the boys; wait till the

men begin."

Bud's reply was greeted with a jeering laugh, and he, reddening with rage that he was drawn into a trap, said:

"Well, I'll go you, long arms, but you will have

to lift first. When you lift it, then I will."

Bert gathered himself together, slightly bent his round back, caught underneath the plate timber with his long arms and slowly straightened up. The big timbers quivered and creaked and finally cleared their rests. Bert walked away amid a chorus of cheers, but the clapping of Cora Bain's fat red hands was pay enough for him, and he went around the rest of the day with a light heart, if he did have aching shoulders.

It was now Bud's turn to lift and all gathered to watch. He threw off his coat, bared his large muscular arms and lifted until his face was purple. At last one end raised while the other quivered in the balance, but Bud could do no more, and he let the frame down, defeated. There was a loud laugh at his expense. Bud turned with a snarl, saying: "There's no one in the shape of a man can do as well. The Virginia football player thinks himself much of a man; I dare him to try it."

Jean ignored the dare and turned away without a word, much to the regret of some of the boys who hated Bud and wished to see him further hu-

miliated.

By this time the workers had all gathered and the work was at once begun. The bents were raised, first by lifting by hand to the height of a man's shoulder, then proppers went underneath with different length props to steady the timbers while the lifters caught new holds. These proppers needed to be the most cool and careful men, as the lives of all might depend on their staying with the props at all times.

All went well with the two ends and one side and work had commenced on the last bent. To aid the lifters on this bent a small pulley was fastened to the opposite wall and a rope passed around it to the bent to be raised. The rope passed over the heads of the lifters and was pulled by a sturdy old horse several yards away.

The heavy timbers had been raised to the men's shoulders and the proppers, four in number, had

crawled under the heavy frame, prepared to set the props at the next life. Their lives depended upon the firm holding of the lifters. Bud Jones lifted on the right end, Bert Hawley on the left and Jean in the middle, with a number of others between.

As the word to lift was given, some one cried: "The rope is breaking." A few men let loose and jumped back, then, as the weight grew greater and greater, others left in a panic, leaving the proppers to their fate. The extra strain on the rope caused the strands to slowly separate. All the lifters had fled except Jean, and, as the rope slowly pulled apart, the whole weight of the timbers settled down on his broad shoulders.

The strange look came into his eyes; the look his chums at school called the football stare; the look of a tormented savage as he stubbornly and quietly meets his fate. Watumska's blood was telling. Every muscle in his wiry form quivered with the strain. The rope parted and the full weight struck his shoulders, but he did not falter. The proppers hurried from their posts and grabbed the beam, others came to their aid, the panic was over, and the last bent was soon raised to its position.

When the work was done, it was found that Jean's shoulder had been badly bruised and lacerated by the square timber. Willing hands were ready to care for the wounds, but Mollie Ming would dress it with her own pretty hands, for Mollie's father, Chris Ming, was one of the proppers. Jean had regained all that the refusal to lift against Bud

Jones had cost him, and Bud left the place more envious than ever.

Supper was served on the grassy lawn, and the marching, dancing, laughing games began. Jean filled his place with them for a while, but he was in a quiet mood and soon stole away to a moonlit seat, and, strangely enough, Mollie Ming was near and Jean invited her out to rest with him.

"Jean," said Mollie, slowly approaching him, "I would like to, but I fear we must not. Bud Jones was mad because we talked together so much at our party, and father wants me to be careful not to

offend him."

"Why does Bud Jones care for us talking; has he any claim on you, Mollie?" Jean asked.

"No, I hate him, Jean, but father does not want him to get mad at us, so on his account we must not stay together too much."

"Well, Mollie, we will do as you say, but I want to walk home with you and your father. May I do

that, Mollie?"

"Yes, Jean, and I wish I could stay with you now, but I had better go," and Mollie hurried away to join a nearby group.

Jean sat out the rest of the games, and then walked home with Chris Ming and Mollie, leading

Red Buck behind.

At the first opportunity, Jean said: "Chris, tell me about this organization they call the Bald-knobbers," for he could not keep the thoughts of these men from his mind.

Chris stammered and looked all about. "Jean, I hardly know how to begin. First, as you will remember, the country was without laws, and many of the best people joined themselves together for protection and to help enforce the laws. Things were much better for a while, but of late the people are losing faith in the clan. I fear its usefulness is past."

"Is it a fact that they are mistreating people, as I have been told? Do they work for revenge, instead of law enforcement?" Jean questioned, not noticing the shadow that passed over Chris's face.

"I am afraid so, Jean, but it is best to say nothing about it. The clan is very strong, and bound to-

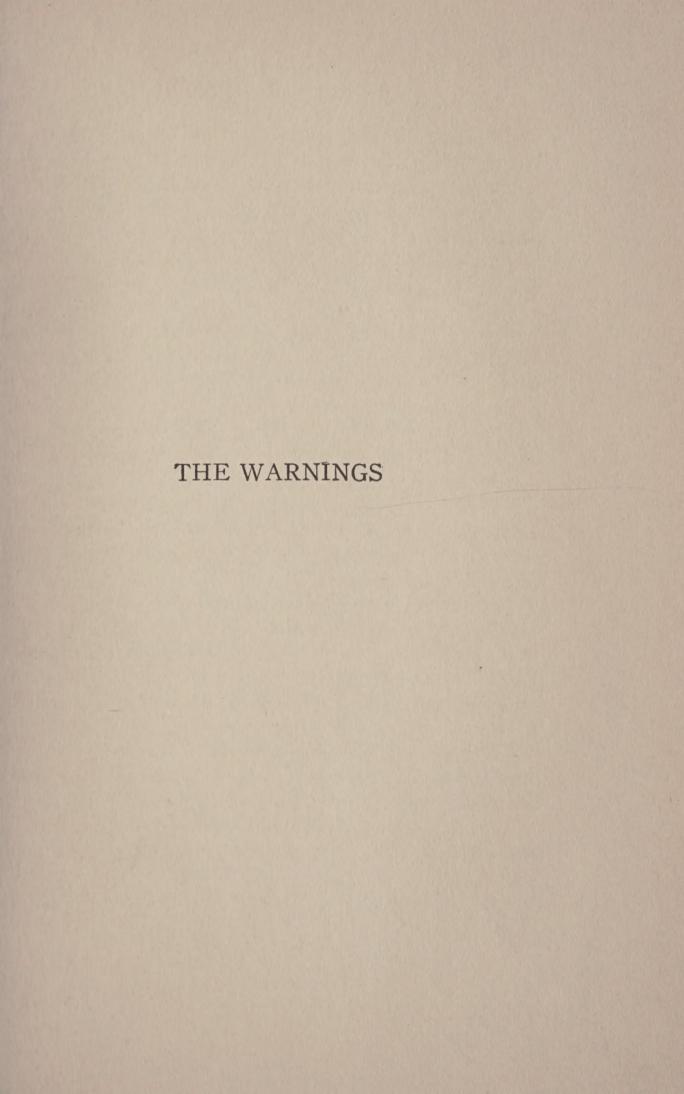
gether by very strong ties."
"Well," said Jean slowly, "I shall not try to perform the duty of others, but I will oppose any man or body of men that I think disturbs the peace of

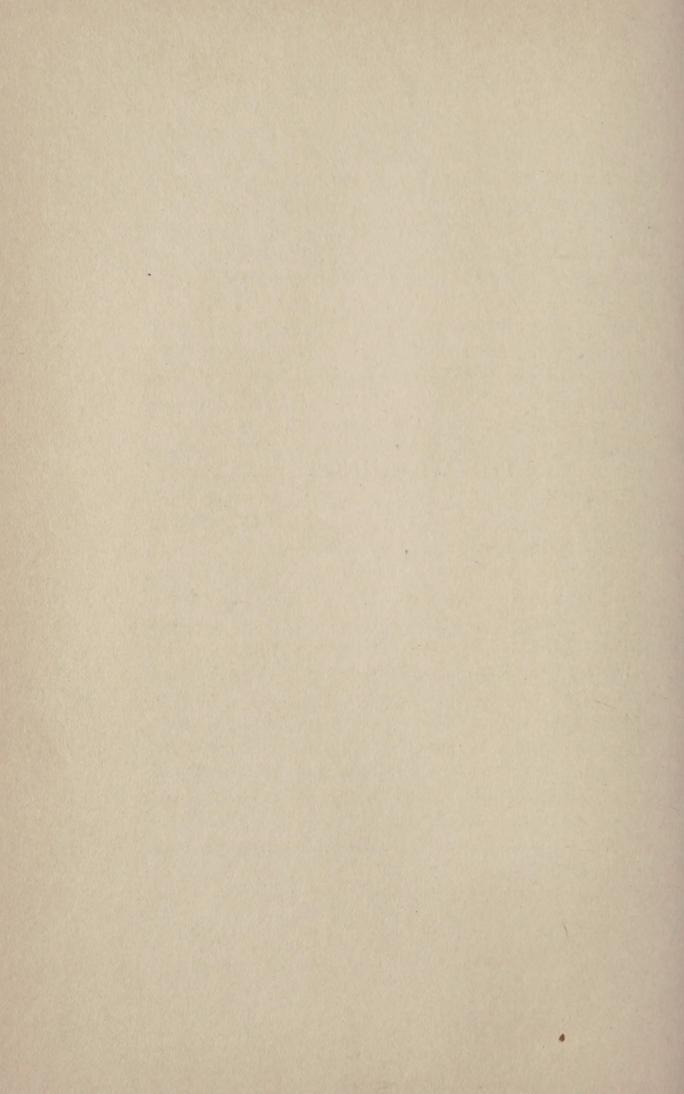
our beautiful country."

On reaching the Ming home, Jean bade Mollie good night while he and Chris continued to talk of the condition of the county. As Jean mounted Red Buck to ride home, he was surprised to see the stooping figure of a man steal away from a bunch of shrubbery near the gate. The man hurried along the fence and into the woods. Jean thought of turning back and telling Chris what he had seen, but he feared he would alarm him needlessly.

When a short distance from home he heard a body of horsemen ride rapidly across the road ahead

of him.





CHAPTER VII

THE WARNINGS

A FEW days after the barn-raising, Jaques Murray called Jean to him as he sat on the porch, his silvery hair glistening in the morn-

ing sunlight.

"Jean," said he, "I was at the store yesterday. While there I overheard some of the store loafers talking, and when they mentioned your name I could not help but listen. They said you were making a great deal of fuss against the Bald-knobbers, and one of them went so far as to say 'He'll likely be visited soon if he don't keep quiet.' I don't want to influence your actions, but I wish to warn you that the clan is strong and seeks excuse to punish those who do not assist them. It is their method of keeping their power. And, while I have refused to pay tribute to their leaders, I have kept clear of their enmity."

"Grandfather," Jean replied, "I don't know what they could have meant. I have not said a word, except to disapprove of their methods of work, and

that only to intimate friends."

"I believe you, Jean, and can only see in such talk an effort to draw you into the clan's power. Keep clear of the clan as far as you can to do your

duty as a citizen. And, now that I think of it, the cattle should be looked up and salted. Have you

time to do it to-day?"

"Yes, the crops are all clean now, and I can go as well as not. Red Buck needs more exercise, anyway. I'll start right off. Don't worry about me getting into trouble with the Bald-knobbers, grandfather; if they bother me they will have to do it without cause."

"Well, I want you to do what you think best, Jean, but I am getting old and would like to end

my days in peace."

Jean saddled Red Buck and rode off across the mountains to the cattle ranges, away across Fishtrap hollow and down by the Falling Spring. The grass was green in the forest and the fat cattle were scattered lazily about, each bunch following their own particular leader. By noon most of the cattle had been seen and Jean stopped by the spring for a cool drink and a rest, while Red Buck grazed on the brink of the stream.

Jean stretched himself on the cool grass and gazed upward through the whispering pines to the clouddotted sky. How wonderful seemed the universe and what pygmies were the people in it. Self-important man, who thinks that his acts may help to shape coming events, when all the artisans of the earth together could not fashion one little cloud, like that in yonder sky. No, could not even grow one twig on that lofty pine, and yet men fret and worry over their toils and troubles. Why, Jean asked himself, was it not better to live the life of

the savage; let each day provide the meat for its meals and each night furnish its own bedding. Civilization means from day to day a contest with human kind; means worries over the present and fears for the future. Only the simple cares of the present trouble the savage breast. Why should I care that a band of lawless men abuse and punish the poor and helpless of the land-yet, I do care. Something within me says: "He that is not for me is against me," and each has his work to do. A tinkling sound far down the valley aroused Jean from his reverie. He raised up from his grassy bed and listened. It sounded again. It was one of the cattle bells, a bunch that had strayed, and he mounted and rode away to locate and salt the remainder of the steers.

The last of the cattle were found on the breaks of Cowskin, near the cabin of Hunter Jack. When they had been rounded together, Jean decided to give the old hunter another call and rode down the slope to his home. The old man was just in from a hunt and had a fine buck hanging from a tree in front of his cabin.

"Hello, Uncle Jack," shouted Jean.

"Why, hello, my boy, what are you doing down here?" the hunter greeted him heartily, "and where is your gun?"

"I didn't bring it this time. I've been looking

up the cattle and didn't think I'd need it."

"You might need it, and you might not. The bee don't always need his sting as he gathers honey, but it comes in handy now and then. I don't sup-

pose there's any varmints that would hurt you 'thout it was two-legged ones, for the wolves are too cowardly and the 'panters' are gettin' scarce. And, from the way they said you held them timbers at the 'razin',' it looks like you might pull a 'panter' clean in two, anyway."

"That wasn't much, uncle. I didn't hold it but a

short time."

"You held it long enough to show them that you could, and to make a fellow I know turn green with envy. I look for Bud to get even with you; he thinks he's the strong man of the county."

"Well, he may still have that honor. I don't

want to steal Bud's honors away from him."

"Well, Bud's feelin' blue, and he always tries to git even when things go against him. I see the Bald-knobbers are stirring a good deal lately. I look for them to break out soon."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because I see them ridin' round through the woods so much. I'm usually huntin' and creepin' about lookin' for game, and I see 'em very often 'thout bein' seen. I think they must have a meetin' place somewheres round here. I might find it, but I'm with them like I am with the moonshiners, I don't want to know too much about 'em. But if I was you, Jean, I'd be careful an' not get in Bud Jones's way."

Jean rode home an hour later thinking of the old man's words and wondering if there might be more in them than had been spoken. He decided to

go back by Chris Ming's and tell him what he had heard.

On the way he passed near Dead Man's Cave and decided to examine it again. Here he found that what had formerly been a hole only large enough for one to enter, was now six or more feet in diameter. It dropped straight down for many feet to a shelf of earth, and from thence in a sloping direction back under a ledge of stone and disappeared in the darkness.

When near the Ming farm, Jean met Chris in the road, who at once called: "Why, hello, Jean,

I've been wantin' to see you."

"All right, Chris; what is it?" Jean replied.

"Jean, you know me well enough to know I'm your friend," and his tones expressed more than his words.

"Yes, certainly," Jean answered wonderingly.

"Well, I've got to ask you to do something that may seem very strange to you, and yet I can't explain to you why I do it."

"That is all right, Chris. I'll not question your

good will, no matter what you ask me."

"I'm glad to hear it, my boy; your assurance makes my task much easier. What I wanted to say was this: Don't visit my house any more for the present."

"Don't visit at your house! Why, Chris, what

have I done?" Jean cried in amazement.

Chris laid his hand on that of his young friend as he replied: "My friend, you don't know how it

hurts me to make this request, but it is best, and I

cannot now tell you why."

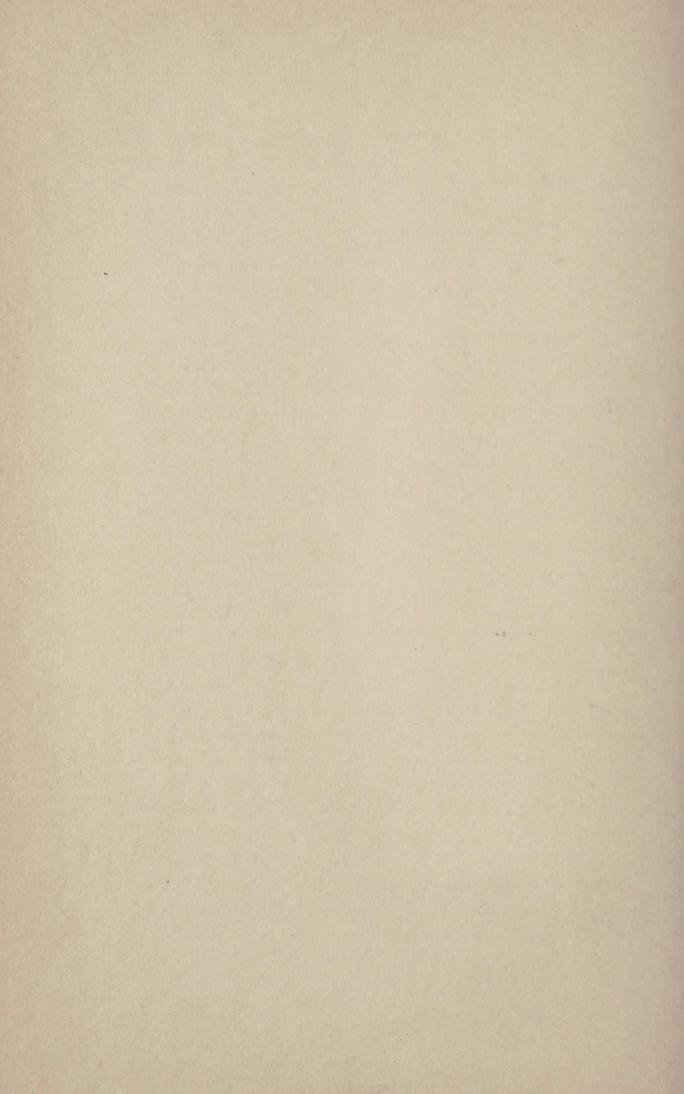
"I beg your pardon, Chris, for speaking as I did, but I was so afraid I had offended you. I'll do as you say, and you may rest assured that I will not feel offended. Let me know when the cause is removed. Now I must go; give Mollie my best wishes."

Jean rode off down the path toward home. Was he dreaming? This morning his grandfather had warned him to beware of the Bald-knobbers, Hunter Jack had cautioned him against Bud Jones, and now his best friend had asked him to keep away from his house without any given cause. Had he made some great mistake, or committed unknowingly some crime? There was surely a cause for such concerted action.

As he rode slowly down a long shady slope, a young girl, riding a gray pony, came galloping across his path from the valley. She did not see Jean as she passed, but as she neared him she gracefully caught a lock of loose hair from her eyes, and a ray from the setting sun, striking the curl, showed a glimpse of dark brown hair with a golden tinge.

Jean leaned forward to speak, but she was gone, and he rode on alone, wondering who this fair young girl with the golden hair could be. In his young mind he conjured up a fairy wood nymph who roamed the twilight forest, and this fairy of the woods took on the form and figure of the strange rider and the soft blue eyes and sun-kissed hair of the girl of his dreams—the girl of the fire.

THE CELEBRATION



CHAPTER VIII

THE CELEBRATION

JULY FOURTH dawned bright and clear and found most of the citizens of the bald-knob country on their way to the county seat where the following attractions were advertised to be seen and heard: A grand barbecue; a street parade, one of the most magnificent pageants ever witnessed; soul-stirring music by the Silver Cornet Band; speaking by men of national reputation, and a "bummer, bumping, bouncing, boisterous, bloodboiling, bugle-bursting band," one of the most laughable attractions of the age; also a free-for-all horse race, with a one hundred-dollar cash prize for the winner.

Jean saddled Red Buck early and started for town. Most of the other young men of the neighborhood had "company," but since Jean could not go with his friend, Mollie Ming, he rode alone. As early as he was he found the highway crowded with all manner of vehicles wending their way to the celebration. There were the loggers' wagons, drawn by the slow-moving, patient oxen and loaded with the logger himself, in a freshly ironed calico shirt which caused him a great deal of uneasiness, and his good wife, in her Sunday best, with the

half dozen children seated in the bottom of the bed, all their faces glowing with the unusual scrubbing preparatory for the trip. The more prosperous, with the double-seated carriages filled to overflowing, were also there; while occasionally a young man, with his "sweetheart" by his side, drove swiftly by in a "covered buggy," the envy of all the other young folks on the road. Intermingled with these were the families in lumber wagons drawn by heavy mules, boys and girls on horseback, and occasionally some one, less fortunate, on foot; but all alike bound on the same mission—to see the crowd and

enjoy the entertainment.

When Jean reached the town the streets were already crowded, the fathers and mothers standing in groups talking and shaking hands with old friends or kindred not seen since last celebration, while along the walk that formed the "square," of which the courthouse was the centre, flowed a continuous stream of the younger generation, the older of these usually in pairs, a boy and a girl, jostling along, bumping about through the moving crowd, he carrying her parasol, she her fan, and each hoping in their hearts that the jam would soon become so great that they would be pushed together until their swinging hands would touch, if but for a moment. Later in the day, tired of seeing the sights, and with courage gained, they would secure seats on some merchant's goods box or salt barrel, or in some sheltered stairway, and in the security of the ever-changing throng, tell to each other the old, old story that is ever new.

Here and there in the moving crowd was seen the ever-present small boy, a toy pistol in one hand, a box of paper caps in his pocket and a look of supreme pleasure in his eyes as he exploded the cap near some timid girl's ear, and danced with joy as she screamed, half with fright, half with bantering timidity.

Under the shade of the broad maples in the court house yard was erected the speaker's stage. It was decorated with wild flowers, ferns and flags, and around it in a wide semicircle were seats of undressed boards. Here the mothers and smaller children gathered and awaited the arrival of the pa-

rade, and the speaking.

It was the boast of the county seat citizens that they always gave all they advertised, and the parade was full, even to the "Bugle-bursting Band," a number of grotesque figures, making hideous noises on a set of outlandish instruments, all followed by

a swarm of hooting, yelling boys.

After the parade the meeting was called together at the speaker's stand by the Mayor of the town, and the Declaration of Independence read by the "professor" of the public school. Following this, a very grandiloquent oration was delivered by the Hon. George W. Goodman, the speaker of the day, and dinner was announced. There was a general rush for the barbecue table, where half-cooked beef and soggy bread were served to all alike by greasy-handed waiters, who found time between rush orders to carry the most savory bits to their own mouths.

The dinner hour proved the most quiet of the day. The committee had prepared an abundance of meat, and all were soon supplied with both hands full and could only retire to some resting place and eat slowly, the condition of the meat making haste very unpleasant, if not decidedly dangerous.

Jean strolled about among the crowds, only occasionally meeting an acquaintance. He found the sight of so many strange faces depressing after the months on the farm, and he wished himself away in the woods. He was in a silent mood and wished to be alone. A sensation of friendlessness had come over him, a condition he usually experienced when in a large crowd or among noisy people. To-day, more than for years before, he felt a longing for the woods, a desire to mingle with the wild things of Nature. He felt the wood's spirit call.

He left the crowded streets and started for the hills, but as he was leaving the town he came upon the race track, where the afternoon races would be run. Frank Jackson was there, walking his saddle horse, Jim, up and down the track, getting him

ready for the contest.

"Come over, Jean," called Frank, "and see my horse."

Jean climbed the fence and joined Frank in admiring Jim's good points. He was a fine claybank, high of head and strong of limb, with a well-rounded barrel and hips and thighs that denoted great strength. He was a noble animal, but built rather for a long, hard chase than for great speed for only a short time.

"What do you think of him? Has he any chance to win?" asked Frank.

"He's a fine horse, Frank," Jean replied; "a fine, strong horse, and would make a good winner in a three or five-mile race. I fear he's too big for a short dash."

"I'm afraid he is, too; but I do so want our side of the county to win, and I don't know who's to do it if Jim can't. Why don't you try Red Buck?"

"Red Buck!" exclaimed Jean in surprise. "He's hardly bridlewise yet, though I believe he could

run if he'd try."

"Run! Of course he could run. Jean, you must put him on. We mustn't let our township lose the race."

"I don't care about the prize, Frank; but I'll tell you what I will do. I'll put Red Buck on the track on condition that the prize, if either of us wins, is given to Mrs. Grayson."

'Who's Mrs. Grayson?"

"She's the widow of Bill Grayson who was killed by the Bald-knobbers last week down on Little North Fork. They were trying to whip him for a crime of which I am sure he was innocent, and when he fought back they killed him. I'll tell you, I don't believe in this bald-knob business."

"Neither do I, Jean; but I don't say much about it. But I'll accept your offer. Both will try for the prize, and if either is successful Mrs. Grayson and her family of little ones will get the benefit and our township will get the honor."

They had now reached the end of the track near-

est to town, and the two friends parted, Frank to further exercise his horse and Jean, in a more sociable mood since there was something to do, to see the race managers, get Red Buck ready and enter him on the list.

Saddles were furnished by the committee, light jockey saddles, padded underneath and with a single girth. A rider was found in the person of "Shorty" Smith, a bright boy of sixteen. Shorty had spent the most of his life around livery barns, caring for and riding horses. Jean took him to the barn to get him acquainted with the beautiful bay.

"Here he is, Shorty," said Jean, leading Red Buck from his stall. "He's all right; but keep an

eye on him. He's young."

"I ain't afraid of him, Mr. Carroll, if he is young," Shorty assured Jean. "That horse has sense, and will know when I treat him right. I'll shore give them fellers a race they'll remember." And he took the bay for a walk up and down the track for exercise.

The race track was different from the usual professional track in that it was straight, the races beginning at the end farthest from town and finishing near an elevation at the near end. This elevation served as a grand stand and, as the central part of the hill was directly opposite the judge's stand, it was the most coveted place.

At two o'clock the band struck up a lively tune and began the march to the track. The march soon changed into a general stampede as each tried to pass all others on the way to the natural grand

stand. Such a vast crowd of people all rushing toward one central point seemed very dangerous, but among these hill people the rights of others are highly respected, and no one was hurt. A place once secured was held sacred to that person, just as if the place had been paid for at a ticket window.

The track was in a valley and built wide enough to accommodate a dozen horses abreast. On the side next the town was a low board fence, built to mark the limits of the track and to keep the crowds back. On the side opposite the knoll was the judges' stand—two goods boxes, with a wagon sheet for a shade. The spectators, men, women and children by the hundreds, stood or sat in the blazing sun waiting patiently for their favorite sport to begin.

There were seven horses in the line-up. They were Frank Jackson's great buckskin, Jim; Red Buck, with his nostrils distended as if he realized there was something unusual to do; Black Ben, Bud Jones' horse, considered the fastest racer in the county; Indian Bess, an Indian pony from Cowskin; Kentucky Jane, Judge Wilson's thoroughbred; and two fine-looking sorrels from the breaks of

White River.

The owners of the horses were all present to see the riders properly mounted. There were also horsemen there from all over the county, and they passed many comments upon the different horses. Red Buck especially drew the attention of the crowd as he was a new horse and yet to be tried.

The animals mounted, the riders drew them up in

line and the starter asked if all were ready. There being no negative answer, a revolver was raised in the air. Each rider leaned forward ready for the spring. Then slowly came the words, one—two—three, a pause, the pistol shot rang out and they were off.

Indian Bess, short of body and quick of action, led at the first leap. All the others were close behind, except Red Buck. For an instant he failed to understand what was wanted, then scenting the race he spurned the ground as if a hated thing and before one-tenth of the track was covered had reached the haunches of the other horses. were all packed close together and Shorty saw that to win he must pass around them. He swung his body to the left to guide the flying horse, there was a snap, a whirl, and he found himself flying through the air. The girth had parted. Nothing but his firm hold on the reins saved him from falling. The saddle had already hit the ground. The bay slacked his speed at the pull on the reins, Shorty's toe touched the earth, his hand caught the flying mane, and before the onlookers could see what had happened he was again astride the horse.

The other horses were now far in the lead, but the race was not over. Shorty touched the horse with his heel, leaned far out on his neck and loosened the rein. He felt the rush of air on his forehead, a cloud of dust about him which changed to grains of sand, then bits of dirt, then all became clear as Red Buck and his rider caught the lead horse, crowded up his side inch by inch and passed

under the wire a good head in the lead. Then the crowd went wild, and all rushed into the track to see the wonderful horse that could win against such odds.

At the other end of the track all was quiet. Jean had walked down to the discarded saddle, picked it up and examined the girth. He found it had been almost severed by the cut of a knife. He faced the crowd with the look of an enraged beast in his eyes. As he held up the cut ends of the girth he said: "The dirty coward that cut that girth is among you. The guilty man knows his crime, and if he will meet me alone out in the woods but one of us will return to tell the story of the meeting."

No one answered a word. All knew it was a challenge to the death. Would the guilty man accept? Jean turned, walked across the track and into the woods. The others walked slowly down to the judge's stand. They hardly spoke, and then in low tones. They felt a great tragedy had almost been

enacted in their midst.

Bud Jones secured his horse and, with a number of his faithful followers, rode straight for home,

where they spent the night in a drunken spree.

Jean met an acquaintance and sent word for Frank to lead Red Buck back to the farm. Mollie Ming, returning with her parents, saw the riderless horse and wondered where Jean could be, but, try as she would, she could not ask the question.

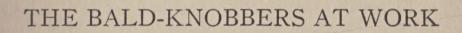
Tean struck into the deep forest and went on and on, neither knowing nor caring where he was. Old Watumska's blood was uppermost and murder was

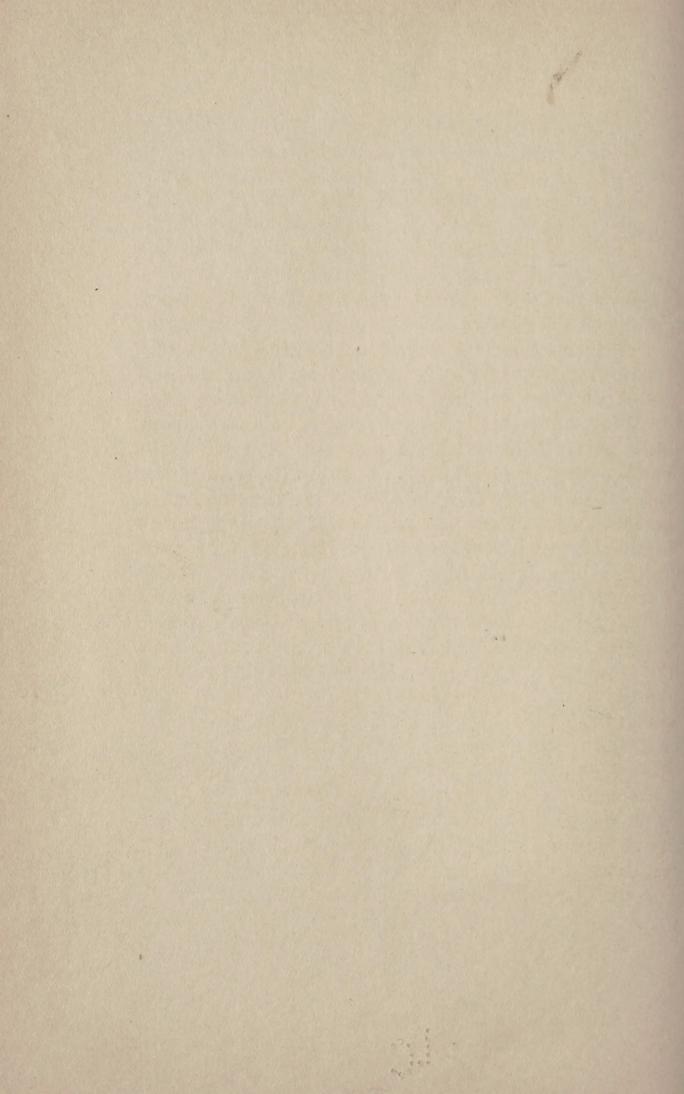
in his soul. Only time for the stiller, slower blood of civilization to gain control could save him. He wandered over hill and valley. The sun went down and still he went on. The moon arose over the silent pines, but its mellow light revealed only a stony

and fiery set face, and burning eyes.

As the passion drove him onward, he passed the houses of settlers in the forest. The dogs came barking over the fence to slink away with drooping tails at the sight of his face. At last he neared the Johnson farm, the Dean home. Here, in the moonlight, Jean halted for the first time. He listened. There were no barking dogs, but there was a light at one of the upper windows. He looked up and beheld a vision of loveliness—a young girl leaning on the window sill, with her chin in her fair hands, was looking wistfully into the night. It was the face of his dreams. He glanced away to make sure he saw. When he looked again the face was gone from the window.

Jean turned homeward. The stony cast had left his face, the fiery gleam had left his eye—civilization had again conquered.





CHAPTER IX

THE BALD-KNOBBERS AT WORK

SINCE the death of Bill Grayson, the Bald-knobbers had caused but little trouble. The Ozark country had assumed an aspect of peace for a few weeks, but early in August John Goss, a school teacher on Cowskin, had been given fifty lashes for punishing a pupil in his care. In shame he quit the school and left the country. Goss had many friends who believed he only did his duty by the child, but they feared to speak out, and the school interests of the county were almost paralyzed. Teachers feared to punish students and the schools all went wild.

Jim Manary, who claimed to be sick, was notified to better provide for his wife and children or he would be punished. Manary, with his family, left their squatter's cabin between suns, all glad to escape unhurt. A man believed to be a member of the clan jumped Manary's claim. He had previously tried to buy the claim, but now secured it free.

There had been a dozen other smaller punishments, such as ducking, tying up by the thumbs and riding on a rail, meted out by these ministers of justice, but none of them were near the Murray

neighborhood.

Quite early one morning a few days after these

outbreaks, Jean met Chris Ming coming from the store. Chris still looked troubled, and Jean, thinking to cheer him up, said: "Good morning, Chris,

you're looking better. How are you?"

"I'm well, Jean, but I'll tell you, I'm bothered all the time," Chris answered. "I know you are my friend, and I want your advice. Will you promise to tell me just what you think, and promise not to say anything about what I say?"

"I promise, Chris, and will speak as I think, but I fear I will be a poor adviser."

The two seated themselves on a fallen tree. After a long silence Chris spoke, carefully choosing his words.

"I know," he began, "my request that you do not visit my home seemed very strange to you, but it is not of that I now speak. I am going to tell you all of another matter that I can without violating

my oath.

"Several years ago, when you were a small boy, this country was torn to pieces by dissensions over war questions, and lawless characters, taking advantage of the situation, walked rough-shod over the people. The lawless element was so strong that the country, divided as it was, could not control it, and no one's life or property was safe.

"While these conditions were at their worst, a good friend and good citizen came to me to see if I would join with him, and as many other good men as we could get, in a secret organization for the purpose of stopping the outlawry that was ruining

the land. I at first refused, and remonstrated with him, telling him that our acts would be unlawful, and that it was not best to become lawbreakers ourselves in order to stop outlawry. Just at this time old man Smiley was murdered in cold blood for his money, and no attempt was made to catch the murderers. After that I consented. This was the beginning of the Bald-knobbers.

"For a number of years we did much to lessen crime in the Ozarks, but the membership is changing, and many unprincipled men have gained access to the clan, and you know the result. It has proved as I feared—one wrong will not right another.

"One of the rules of the clan is, 'Once a member always a member,' and for that reason, and for no

other, I am still a Bald-knobber.

"As long as I thought there was hope of bettering the band I attended the meetings and fought for just orders, and for that reason some of the leaders wish to see my downfall. I have asked to be released, but they will not release me, although many others have been released from active work. They want to hold me in their power. I am even accused of being a traitor and betraying their secrets, and, if they did not fear the anger of their own men, I believe I would be punished or my life taken. All the while I realize that the honest members are dropping away and the lawless element gaining control, and when they do, God help the old guard, for they will be forced to become criminals or suffer.

"I have told you this long story, Jean, that you may understand my position, and perhaps devise

some plan for me to follow."

Jean sat a long time before he said: "Chris, I can see but one way. An oath that binds you to do a wrong should not be considered. Report to the officials what and who this clan is and help to prosecute them."

"That would be more than useless, Jean," Chris replied. "The officials either are in sympathy with them or fear them. One man tried that. He was shot from the woods the next night. It isn't that I so fear to die, but I fear for my family when I am gone."

"I guess you are right, Chris; they hold their power by using their united strength. I see no way except to do your best and wait to see what happens. Just wait, and cross the bridge when you come to

it."

"Well, Jean, I've told you what I've told no other man, and if things come to the worst you will know how they came, and one outside the clan will know that I did not approve their acts, and that it was not my will that kept the clan going. Some of the clan hate you, Jean, and will injure you if they can get an excuse, but, come what will, I will not hurt the feelings of my only child by longer keeping you away from my home. It may not be best to come too often, but I will be glad for you to come occasionally."

"Thank you, Chris, I will be glad to come when I can do so without injuring you or your family. I

did not feel hurt at your former request; I half

guessed the cause."

At this moment a horseman came rapidly up the road. As he passed in a run he cried: "Go to Lem Anderson's; he's shot. I'm going for the doctor." Jean sprang to his feet, saying: "Let's go, Chris,

and help them."

Chris turned pale and murmured: "Jean, I cannot go. I know what it is. You go on and help them."

As Jean ran down the road toward the Anderson place, he glanced back. Chris still sat where he had left him, his head bowed and his face buried in his hands—a young man in years; an old man in ap-

pearance.

Lem Anderson lived on a small, rough farm near the schoolhouse; a poor man with a large family; strictly honest, but very nervous and excitable. A neighbor, Cal Clark, had quarreled with Anderson over a partition fence, and very bad feelings existed between them. During the summer Clark had lost some hogs and in his anger had accused Lem of stealing and butchering them. The Bald-knobbers had learned of the accusation and, as Lem was loud in his denunciation of them and their acts, they thought it a good time to teach him a lesson.

In the dead of night a dozen masked men rode up to the Anderson gate, and in a disguised voice

called for Lem to come out.

Lem answered them from the window: "Well,

what's wanted?"

"We would like to speak to you a minute," replied the voice.

"All right, come in. I'll be at the door right

away," said Lem, closing the window.

Lem came to the door, and not finding any one there walked on out to the gate. When he saw the masked men he flew into a great rage. "Hell! What kind of a trick is this?" he demanded. "What do you want? Speak it out and be off."

"We are looking for Cal Clark's hogs," came the

answer.

"Cal Clark's hogs be d——d, and you with them. I don't know anything about his hogs. Now, get out of here; I don't want to be bothered longer by a set of masked thieves. I'm going back to bed."

"Not so fast, my little man," called the leader. "Cal Clark's hogs are in your smokehouse, and we

are going to see them."

"You're a bunch of them d——d Bald-knobbers, as big a set of thieves as ever went unhung, but you'll get nothing or see nothing here. Polly, O Polly, turn Tige loose and bring my gun. I'll show you cowardly curs how to interfere with an honest man. I know you, you cowards; at least, some of you. That big rascal's Bud Jones, the biggest coward living, and old cross-eyes there is Jake Davis, the biggest cow thief on Cowskin. You're a nice lot to be looking after hogs. Polly, where's that gun?"

"You've said enough, old man. We've come here to look into your smokehouse, and we're going to

do it. Will you open the door?"

"No, I'll be d——d if I will," and Lem backed up to the door and barred the way.

The men consulted a moment and some were detailed to watch while the others broke their way in.

In the house the children were crying and screaming and Polly Anderson opened the door and stepped out. "Oh, Lem, let them in," she said. "You know there's nothing for them to find. Let them in before they hurt you."

"No, I won't let them in. They've no right in there. They'll walk over my dead body when they

enter."

The masked men had been manœuvring to gain the advantage, but failing to catch him off his guard one of the men was ordered to close with him. The detailed man walked straight up to Anderson, who stood with his hands behind him, telling the man not to touch him. The man made a grab, intending to encircle Lem's arms, but one of the children had opened the door and Tige, at a single bound, had seized the masked man's shoulder. Lem's arm jerked free, and a knife gleamed in the starlight. "Shoot!" came the command, and two shots rang out. Man and dog fell to the ground, both mortally wounded. The masked men hurried to their horses and away, while the stricken family gathered at the wounded man's side.

One of the children ran to a neighbor to have a doctor called. The news spread and the neighbors gathered in. Lem did not regain consciousness, and died in a few hours.

When Jean arrived Lem was dead, and nothing could be done except to assist in the preparation for burial. Friends of the family, to prove the honesty

of the deceased, had a number of men examine the smokehouse. No meat, except some small pieces butchered months before, were found. And, further to establish Lem's innocence, Cal Clark, who deplored the murder, acknowledged that his hogs

had returned the evening before.

The county coroner held an inquest the next day. News of the killing had spread rapidly and hundreds of men from all over the county gathered to hear the evidence. Only the family were used as witnesses. They could not identify any of the men, but repeated what Lem had said about Bud Jones and Jake Davis. The jury retired and returned in a few minutes with the verdict: "Lem Anderson came to his death from a gunshot wound inflicted by unknown person or persons."

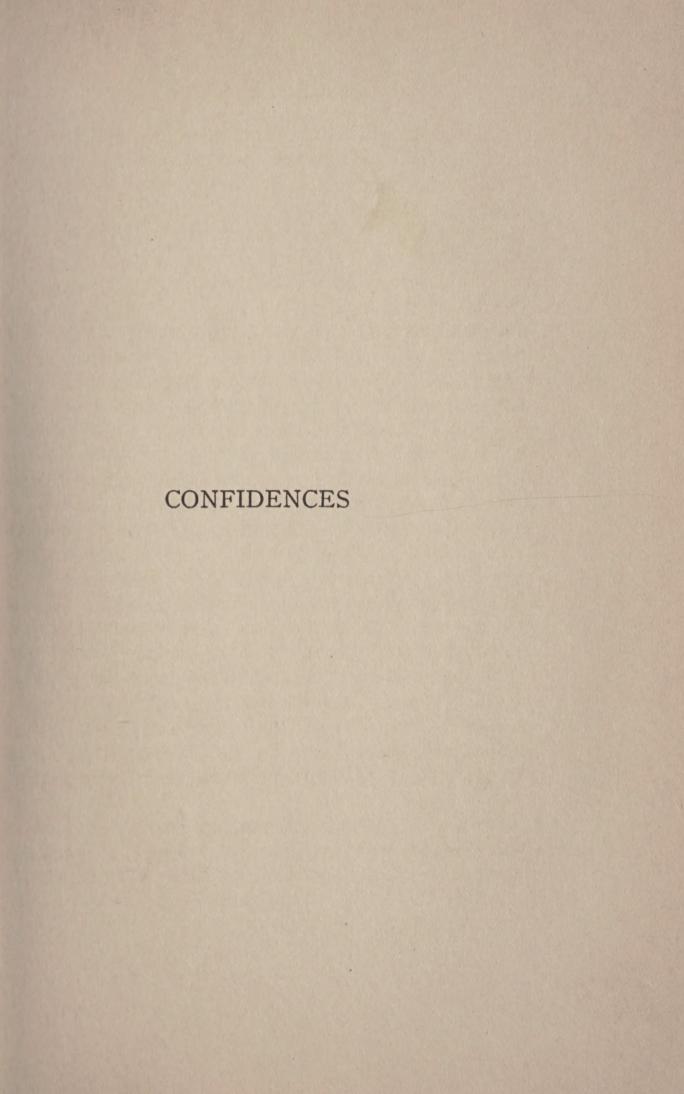
At the jury's verdict there was a hush in the room. All realized that the inquest was a farce. Jean arose from his seat and left the room. He had started to walk away when some of those, who were outside and could not hear, asked him about

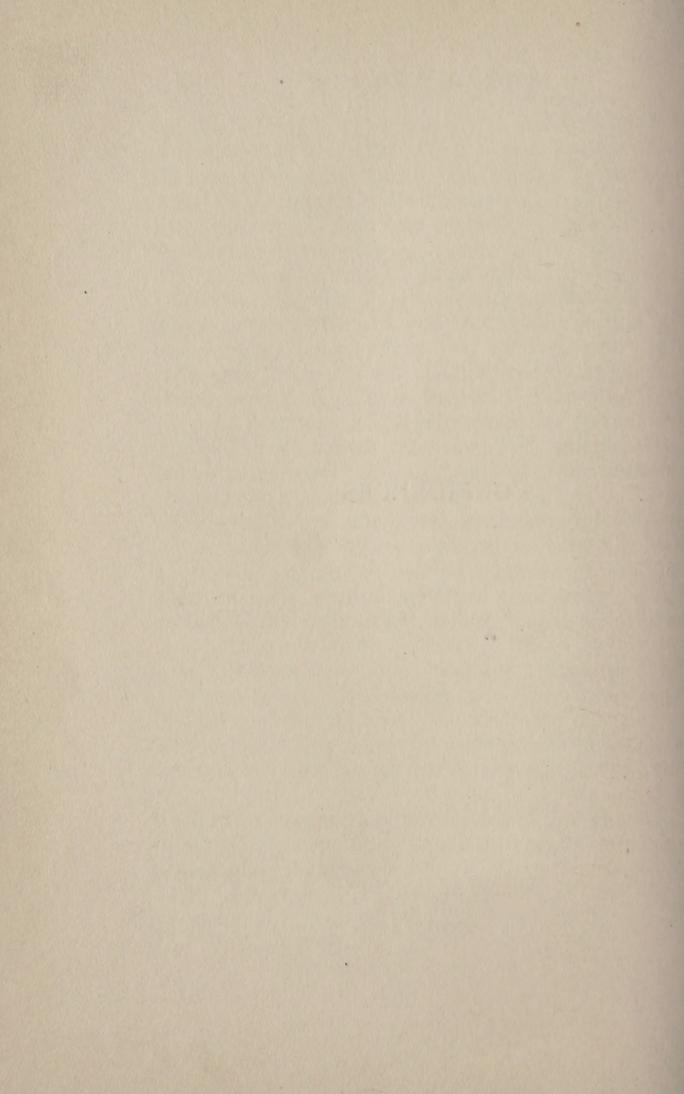
the evidence.

"The evidence," Jean replied, "says murder in the first degree; the verdict says killed by unknown persons. I say the man who fired that shot and the leader who gave the order ought to be hung on the same tree—and would be, if the officers did their duty."

There were nods of assent, but no one voiced their sentiments, and Lem Anderson's murderers

went unscathed.





CHAPTER X

CONFIDENCES

HE country store and post office was not only the place for the distribution of the mail, but for country gossip as well. And now, since the crops were harvested, the goods-box informa-

tion bureau was generally well represented.

The blacksmith, with his tanned face and calloused hands, was taking a lay-off on account of the heat, and a dozen or more loungers were holding their daily meeting on the shady side of the build-

ing. Pleas Revis, the blacksmith, was talking.

"I'll tell you, boys, what's the matter. The boy's right. They've carried this business too far. It's all right to switch a man right good if he needs it, but when it comes to shootin' a man down, I quit. I don't want to say anything against the clan, but I hope the boy will keep on talking."

"There's one thing they've found out, I reckon, and that is he won't scare," spoke up another. "He's been warned two or three times, but goes on just

as he pleases."

"No, Dad Wilkins, the boy won't scare, and he'll fight, too. You can see that in his eyes. I saw him at the Fourth when he found his girth cut and you could just see h——l in him."

"Talk of the devil and he's sure to appear,"

said the blacksmith. "There he comes now."

Jean Carroll was coming up the road from toward the river, and the subject was at once changed. Jean received his mail and stepped into the shade to speak to the men he knew.

"How's crops on the river, Jean?" one asked him.

"Generally good. A little too much rain for corn, but I think it will come out all right. How are your crops, Dad?"

"Only fair, only fair; but I guess it's my fault, for Mr. Dean's got the best corn I ever saw. He's

the man on the Johnson place, you know."

"Yes, I know his name, but I have never met him," Jean replied. "He doesn't go around much."

"No, not much; but it's not because he's stuckup. He just keeps busy on the farm. No, he's not stuck-up, and the rest of them ain't, either. They are just as neighborly as they can be. When my old woman was sick that girl come over thar to see her, and would stay and cook the supper in spite of us, and they say they've got skads of money."

Jean turned away and started for home. He had learned without asking something of the Dean family, but he felt disappointed. Yet, if he had been asked, he could not have told why. On his way to the store he had come by the river road, but on his return took the longer way through the forest, around near the Dean farm. This road passed by

Chris Ming's.

Jean found Mollie on the porch sewing. He no-[112]

ticed, as she came out to meet him, that she looked pale and heavy eyed.

"I'm so glad to see you, Jean; come in and rest

awhile," Mollie said, as she reached the gate.

"No, Mollie, I must go on toward home. Can't you come out and walk a ways with me?"

"Yes, I guess so. Wait till I get my bonnet."

When she had rejoined him Mollie said: "What is the matter, Jean, that you have stayed away so long? Have I done anything to make you mad?"

"Not in the least, Mollie; I've been very busy this

season."

"That's not all. I believe there's something else

the matter. What is it, Jean?"

"Yes, Mollie, something is troubling me, and the same thing has been keeping me from seeing you, yet I can't tell you what it is. But this I can tell you, it is not because I do not consider you my best friend. Yes, my only friend, and now it seems that I am not worthy of the friend I have."

"Don't talk that way, Jean. You know you have

lots of friends—friends all around here."

"Yes, perhaps," and Jean spoke gloomily; "friends of a kind. Friends as long as I'm on top, but ready to kick me as soon as I'm down. I don't want that kind of friends. I want friends that can sympathize with my failures and rejoice in my successes, that are interested in the things I am interested in, and will stand by me, up or down."

"Jean, I hope I am that kind of a friend to you,

for you have always been that kind to me."

"Mollie, I believe you are just that kind of friend to me, and that is why I always come to you with my troubles. And how I've missed you lately."

"Jean, I'm so glad you think of me that way, for I have something to tell you. Something I couldn't tell any one else. Jean, I don't know why it is, but Bud Jones keeps hanging around here and talking to me, and, what makes it worse, father seems to favor him and wants me to be very nice to him. Father don't seem like himself lately, and I'm afraid Bud has the advantage of him in some way."

"It may be so, Mollie, it's not for me to say; but Bud Jones is a rascal and would not stop at anything to gain his desires. He has hated me ever since our fight at school long ago. I don't want to have trouble with him, but one thing he must do, he must let you alone. Tell me if he bothers you

again."

"I won't let him bother me, and I don't know what father means by being so thick with him."

"Oh, perhaps they are connected in business. I wouldn't worry over it; just keep out of his way."

"Now, Jean, I must go back, we're almost to the

Dean farm."

"Yes, so we are; but you needn't hurry. It's a long time till dark. I'm glad I've seen you to-day; I always feel better when I've had a friendly talk with you. It seems there's more to live for when you've been with friends you can trust. Do you see much of your new neighbors now? I have never met any of them but Mr. Rogers, and am hardly acquainted with him."

"Yes; I see them almost every day. The old folks are such nice people and Ula is just splendid. We're almost chums now. I wish you could meet her. She has the sweetest, tenderest blue eyes and lovely brown hair, with just a shade of gold. She saw you at the celebration while you were listening to the band, but you were too 'miffy' to come around where we were. She thought she had seen you sometime before, but did not know where. Then as you turned away she said: 'Oh, I know now,' and then wouldn't talk any more."

"You give a good account of Miss Dean; what about Mr. Rogers? Does he prove as interesting

as his cousin?"

"Yes; he's very interesting, especially when he talks of the plants around here. You know he's a botanist. I think him a very nice man."

"Yes, I think so, too, from what I've seen of

him."

"If you will come to our house next Friday evening you can meet them. They're coming over then."

"I don't expect I can come, but I hope you will have a nice time. But, now, don't fall in love with the botanist."

"I won't, for I don't think it will do any good. His cousin seems to take most of his time. Goodby, Jean, I wish you could come Friday."

"I wish I could, too, but suppose I can't. Good-

by."

Mollie hurried back to her home, but Jean walked slowly away, buried in thought. Why was it that Bud Jones must always come up before him? Was

Bud forcing his attentions upon Mollie through his hold upon her father? He would find out and teach

him to keep his place.

Jean stopped and sat down on a fallen tree by the roadside and listened to the pines. The wind was rising as the sun went down, and the pines were speaking in angry tones. They told tales of intrigues and plots, fights and broils and bloodshed. But the winds died down and the harsh words stopped and the whispering sighs told of peace and love and home.

Jean was wakened from his reveries by footsteps on the path, and a cheery voice saying: "Good evening."

"Good evening, Mr. Rogers," said Jean. "I have been up to the store and was stopping a moment to

rest and listen to the pines."

"I wouldn't think you'd need rest, from the reputation for strength you made at the barn raising. Ever since that time, Mr. Dean has expressed a desire to see you. He's a great admirer of the physical man. He was once a football player of no mean ability."

"I hope to have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Dean, yet I trust I will prove interesting in other

ways than mere physical strength."

"I beg your pardon, if my words conveyed that meaning. I am sure Mr. Dean would be glad for social reasons also. He has been very busy this summer, and has not met many of his neighbors. We hope to have more time to be neighborly, now that the crops are done."

"Is Mr. Dean pleased with our country? Sometimes newcomers get shocked at our ways and leave."

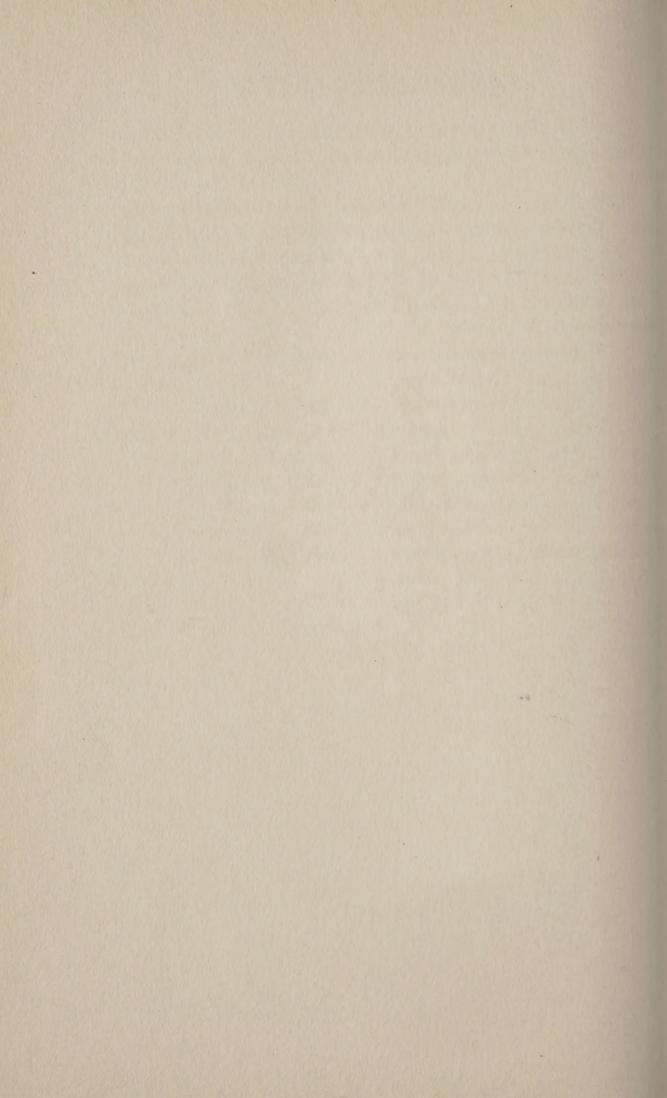
"Mr. Dean is highly pleased, and especially with the open-heartedness of the people. It is gratifying to meet an open-hearted welcome to a friend's house after the artificiality of modern society. Well, here our paths part. Call and meet Mr. Dean and family when you can."

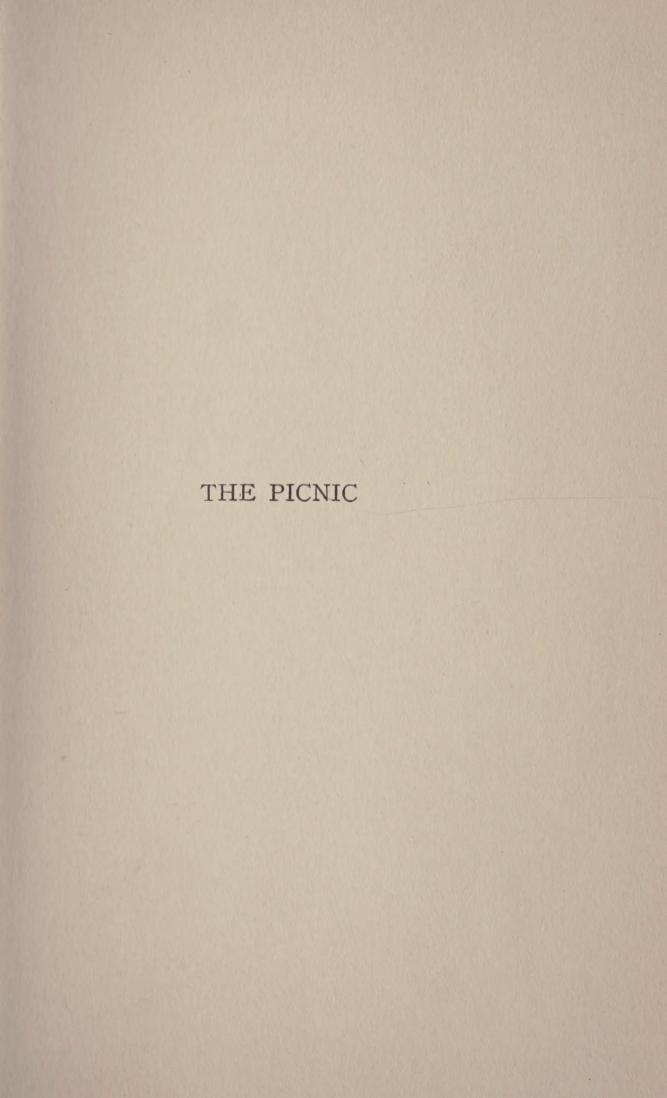
"I will be pleased to do so, and will be glad to

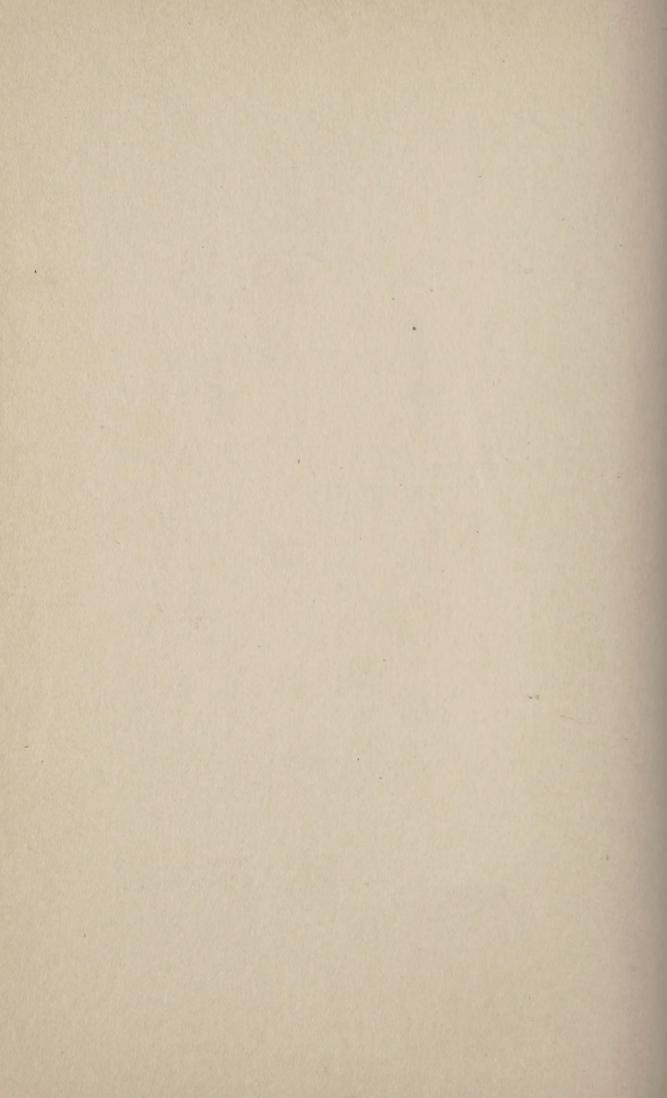
have you call at my home."

"I shall be pleased to do so. Good night."

"Good night," answered Jean, and entered the forest. And this was Martin Rogers, as fine a specimen of intelligent manhood as one would wish to meet. A feeling akin to jealousy entered Jean's heart as he remembered Mollie's words about Rogers' time being taken up by his Cousin Ula.







CHAPTER XI

THE PICNIC

Ozarks, and the young people were preparing for their annual picnic on Swan Creek. Frank Jackson had been chosen manager of the picnic for the year, and he, with Sam Miller and the other young men of the neighborhood, had spent all their spare time for weeks arranging details. Their plans contemplated a five-mile row up the river to Greer's Spring, with dinner at noon, supper in the evening and a float down the river by moonlight.

All the young people for miles around were invited, as well as a few of the more lively married couples, who would act as chaperons. Games, fishing along the banks of the stream and flower-gathering in the forest were among the amusements promised. For years the young people had held a picnic each autumn, and these annual holidays were

looked forward to with great anticipation.

The morning of the day of the picnic dawned foggy and cool, but with the rising sun the fog settled to the earth and disappeared, and they all felt assured the day would be fair. By eight o'clock

the groups had begun to gather at Denny's old mill for the start and within an hour's time the bank of the stream was lined with happy young people.

Partners for the row up-stream were chosen by lot. Each lady placed her name in a hat and the gentlemen drew for partners. There being more boys than girls, some blank slips were put with the names, to give all a chance.

Bud Jones had charge of the drawing, and when the names were all in called to Frank Jackson to

have the boys begin drawing.

"All right," called Frank, "but wait a minute and let's see if all are here. We want to give all the boys and girls a fair chance."

Ula Dean went over to where Mollie Ming was

talking to Martin Rogers and whispered to her.

"Oh, Frank," cried Mollie, "Jean Carroll is not

here. We mustn't start without him."

"He can't start until about ten o'clock," said Bert Hawley. "I saw him as I came by. There's some traders there, and he could not leave his grandfather. He said for us not to wait for him."

"Oh, that's too bad," came from a number of

places. "Let's wait for him," suggested one.

"Why should we spoil our fun for one cry-baby," said Bud Jones. "If he can't leave his grandfather, let him stay at home. Come on, boys, and take your chance."

All were anxious to get started and the drawing began. As the names were drawn out, the winners hurried away to find their partners among the chattering, laughing girls and women. Those who drew

blanks gathered together into a "Bachelor's party," and rowed up the river, laughing and shouting and enjoying themselves as well as many of the others.

Martin Rogers drew Mollie Ming's name and both seemed well pleased as they boarded his pretty

new canoe and paddled slowly away together.

Bud Jones was the last to draw, and found Ula Dean as his partner, although Sam Miller, who was the last one before Bud to draw, assured his friends that Bud had held out Ula's name for himself, as the slip he secured was the last in the hat. Sam drew a blank, and paddled off with the bachelor crowd.

When the picnic ground was reached all gathered on the grassy bank under the shade of some fine old sugar maples. Here Frank announced the hour for dinner, supper and the start for home, and told them

all to go enjoy themselves.

The married men wandered away to fish for bass in the spring stream. Some of the younger boys and girls formed exploring parties to climb the cliffs and bluffs near the river's bank, while others went in search of autumn flowers in the near-by woods and valleys.

The married ladies went about the preparation of dinner. They were busily engaged in this work when Jean rowed up the stream with a strong, steady stroke and pulled his canoe upon the bank.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ming. Good morning, Mrs. Hartley, and the rest of the ladies," Jean addressed them. "This is a fine day for an outing."

"Oh, so fine!" said Mrs. Hartley. "It was too

bad you could not make the trip up with us. It was

great fun."

"I feel sure it was a fine trip, but if I had been there I might have disappointed some one by beating them out of their partner. There were some blanks in the lottery for partners, I know. I only came up on a blank. I hope that in drawing for a partner for life I won't be so unfortunate."

"You will if you don't keep around where the drawing is going on, and that place at this moment, I guess, lies up that valley, for that is the way the young people went," Mrs. Miller said, laughingly.

"All right, I suppose that is a hint for me to go,

so I will see if I can find them."

The women all denied that they wished to get rid of him, but Jean left in the direction the others had taken.

"What a splendid-looking young man," said Mrs. Hartley. "Doesn't he look strong and sturdy, and

he has such a pleasant face and kind eyes."

"His face looks kind enough, Mrs. Hartley, when he's in a good humor," replied Mrs. Johnson; "but they say he has an awful temper. I saw him once when he was mad and his countenance was frightful. It was on the Fourth, after the races. He then looked more like some great, angry beast than a man."

Jean followed the valley for some distance, then climbed up the south side to the level pine lands, the borders of the great Irish Wilderness. He struck a trail leading toward the woods and followed it for more than a mile. He had halted to listen for

some of the party, when a fawn, still carrying the spots of youth, came leaping along a cross trail. Jean stopped to watch it. The young deer passed within a few yards of him and was almost out of sight when a long, lithe, brown body shot through the air from an overhanging tree and crushed the fawn to the earth.

The struggle was brief. The huge panther, the dread of the Ozark hunter, caught the fawn by the throat, and after a hard shake raised the still quivering body from the earth and started off for the denser forest.

Jean had no gun, but he determined to find where the beast lived, and surmising that the fawn was being carried to its young, followed stealthily after it. The chase was a long one, but ended at last when the panther, after a careful survey, entered a cave in the slope on the Western side of Granny Moon's knob.

Jean noted the exact location of the cave, then turned back toward the picnic grounds. Looking at the sun he found it was long past noon. Well, thought he, I've missed the picnic dinner, but I've found the den of that plague of our sheep and calves.

Bud Jones had joined the group of flower seekers on arriving at the picnic grounds, and all through the tramp in the woods managed to keep close to Ula Dean's side, all the time trying to interest her in his affairs. Ula was kind to him and Bud imagined he was making great headway when dinner was announced.

All had gathered around the tempting spread when Minnie McFadden asked: "Hasn't Jean come yet? He should have been here an hour ago."

"He did come," answered Mrs. Ming. "That's his canoe. He went to the woods to look for your

party."

The state of

"Well, what could have happened to keep him out so long?" said Ula Dean. "He couldn't be lost, for I

understand he is a good woodsman."

Bud Jones, who was sitting by Ula's side, spoke up in a jeering tone: "You needn't worry about him. He's probably off enjoying himself alone, eating raw meat like his heathen granddad."

Ula's face reddened with anger and shame. She opened her mouth to defend the absent one when

Mollie Ming took up the gauntlet.

"He may eat raw meat, Bud Jones, but he wouldn't strike a man behind his back," she said.

Bert Hawley, who was down at the end of the table, spoke up in his loud, droll voice: "I'd rather have a heathen granddad than be a heathen myself." Then he broke out in a loud haw-haw at his own joke, the younger boys joining in.

Bud's face turned pale with anger as he said: "Miss Ming, what are you and Bert Hawley getting mad about; are you the young Indian's champions? And is Bert mad because a savage and a monkey

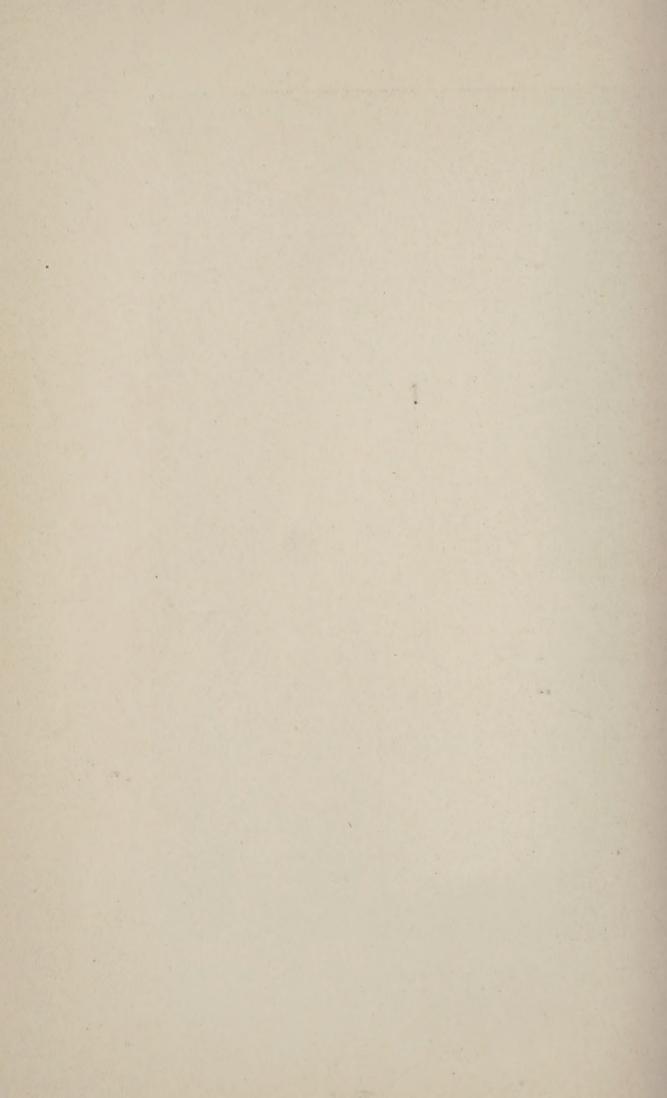
for a granddad is so much alike?"

"Yes, Bud Jones, I am Jean's champion," Mollie replied, "and the champion of any other friend who is maligned in his absence."



"Oh, Mr. Carroll, how glad I am to see you," she cried. "I thought I was lost."

(Jean Carroll.)—P. 127.



"Well, then, you had better keep him at home more. He's been seen roaming the woods at some very strange hours," Bud retorted.

"I'd like to know what those who saw him were

doing?" Mollie flashed back at him.

At the retort there was a general laugh and the quarrel was further stopped by Bert Hawley, who came over to Bud's side of the table, with a puzzled look on his face, and said: "Bud Jones, did you mean me when you spoke of a monkey for a grand-dad? If you did I'll make you eat it."

Bert's comical appearance caused a laugh all around, and he retired to his place beside his sweetheart, Cora Bain, who whispered a word to him that cleared the cloud from his brow and he joined

in the laugh with the others.

As a part of the programme for the afternoon a number of the girls had arranged for a hunt for some rare ferns which were supposed to grow in the adjoining forest. Bud Jones had planned a canoe ride up to the spring. He expected Ula to go along, but she took the opportunity to escape his company, and joined the flower hunters. There were six in the party, and they were soon deep in the forest in search of the coveted plants.

"Girls," said Mollie Ming, "we don't see enough of the ground this way. We ought to spread out, and if any of us find the ferns we can call the others." The party then spread out fan-shape, Mollie Ming on the left and Ula Dean on the right, and

all advanced into the forest.

Ula had never before been alone in the depths of a great pine forest, and there soon came over her a feeling of awe and admiration. She walked on almost entranced. She fancied herself in a vast cathedral, carpeted with a soft-brown cloth and ceiled with a canopy of green, while the huge trunks served as columns which formed long aisles in which

countless thousands might worship.

She passed over a low bank into a very shallow valley. Here she found a bunch of the coveted ferns, but there being only a few she would not call the others, but gathered them herself. When the ferns were gathered, she looked about, but none of the other girls were in sight. She looked again, and as far as vision extended stood the great trees, rearing their whispering heads a hundred feet from the earth. The solitude almost frightened her. She felt that at any moment some great God of the forest might walk out before her and inquire why she had intruded into his solitary haunts. She stopped, she knew not how long, then, remembering she was alone, turned and hurried to the left, where the other girls had last been seen. She walked on and on, and not finding her friends as she expected, turned again, this time to the right, and went unknowingly straight into the forest.

While Ula was gathering the ferns the other girls had moved on. After several minutes one of those on the left discovered some ferns and all rushed to her. When the ferns had been gathered and Ula did not join them, they called, but received no an-

swer.

"She is away to the right, girls; we must hurry on that way and find her," said Minnie McFadden. The girls kept searching for Ula and calling her, and at last, not finding her, became frightened and hurried back to the river to get the boys to help.

In the meantime Ula had become thoroughly lost. She heard the call of the girls, but thought it the boys at camp, and pushed on into the forest. She traveled more than a mile before realizing she was not nearing the picnic grounds. She stopped short, brushed back a curl from her eyes and leaned against the trunk of a big pine to rest and decide

what course to pursue.

As Ula stood there, the cluster of beautiful ferns in her arms, her golden-brown hair unloosed from its fastenings and her pure blue eyes gazing around her in wonder, she might have been taken for some wood-nymph preparing to call her vassals about her. She had just stepped away from the tree to call for help when her eyes fell on Jean, hat in hand, not a dozen steps away.

"Oh, Mr. Carroll, how glad I am to see you," she cried. "I thought I was lost. I believe this is Mr.

Carroll."

"Yes," replied Jean, "and I believe you are Miss Dean. How you have grown. You were only a little girl then. And your hair is darker, but your eyes are the same."

"You have grown, too; but how came you here?"

"I have been a long way out in the woods and was on my way back. I might ask you the same question."

"I started out with the other girls to gather ferns, and while gathering these and admiring the forest I was left behind. Can you find the way back?"

"Oh, yes, we will find the way all right; but you must be tired and warm. Come and rest on this

log."

At his bidding the city-bred girl sat down beside this almost stranger of the forest without a thought of why she felt so safe and secure. That night in her room she wondered at her actions and at Jean Carroll's familiar words when they met. Why had she not felt offended?

After being seated Ula said: "This is my first visit to the forest, Mr. Carroll. Isn't it lovely?"

"There's no place like the forest to me. It's my best friend. To it I tell all my troubles and express all my hopes, and its voice always answers in sympathy. Listen to its music now, it's singing a song of youth and hope, love and happiness. When you are sad it brings to you a song of sympathy and hope for the future. In the forest the preacher can hear the choir singing, the herder his cattle lowing, the hunter his foxhounds baying, and the maiden her lover singing, all in the music of the pines. Oh, I love the forest."

"I love it, too; it's so solemn and great and grand. I'm so glad I've come to live among the pines. Now

I'm rested, shall we go?"

"Yes, we had better go, for the others will be worried about you," and he assisted her from the log and together, side by side, the man and the

maiden, newly met but not strangers, walked toward the river, each feeling they had always been friends.

As they went down the mountain side, a ray from the sinking sun caressed the maiden's hair and the man walking by her side wondered that the mellow golden tint of childhood still clung to the darkened tresses of womanhood, and, as in a vision, he saw again the golden-haired girl of the fire as the woman by his side.

All was excitement over the preparations for the search for the lost girl as the two neared the camp, and great was the relief when they arrived safe and

sound.

There was one exception. Bud Jones' face showed indignation and chagrin. When he learned that Ula was lost he hoped it would be his pleasure to find her and bring her to safety, and now for his

hated rival to gain the honor angered him.

Supper was soon over, the table cleared and the canoes gathered at the landing for the trip downstream. Most of the boys had arranged for their partners for the homeward voyage. Jean, as he had come up alone expected to return the same way. He had nearly reached the bank to unfasten his canoe. Ula and some other girls were standing near, and Bud Jones was hurrying toward them, when Ula said: "Mr. Carroll, have you a partner downstream?"

Jean answered that he had not.

"May I ride with you? I have been left alone."
"Certainly, Miss Dean. I shall be happy to have

you with me. I would have invited you before, but feared you had accepted the company of another,"

answered Jean gladly.

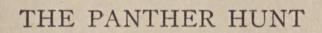
Bud Jones asked Mollie if she had an escort, and on being informed that she would ride with Mr. Rogers, he turned away with a snarl about city dudes, and entered his canoe and hurried away ahead of the crowd.

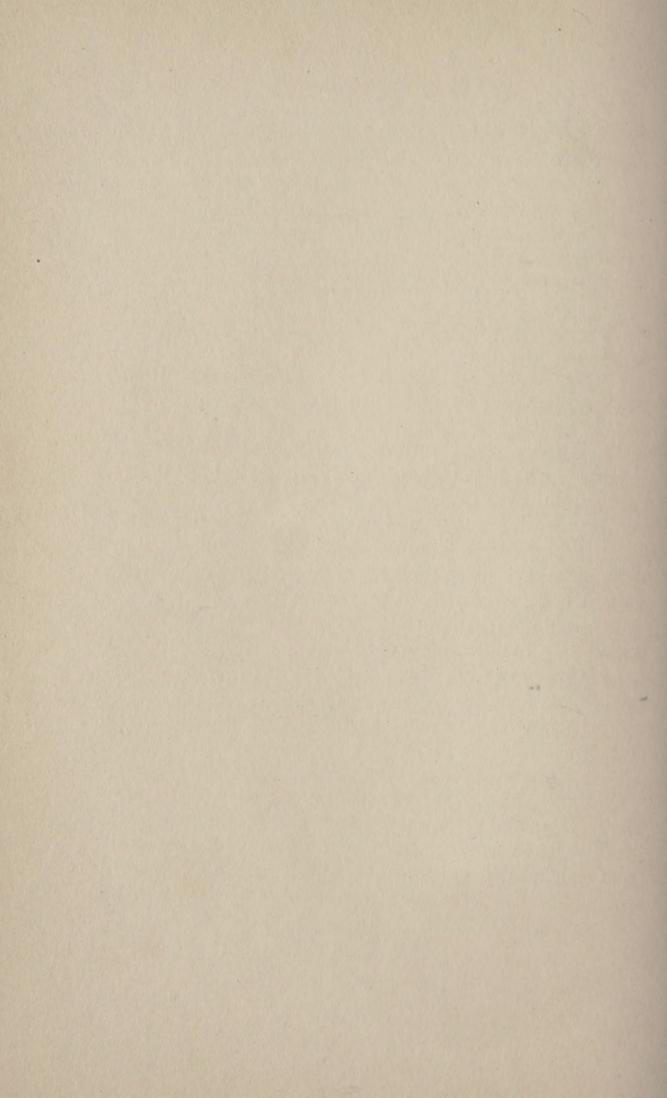
The autumn moon shone over the landscape as the long line of canoes glided down the beautiful stream. Each star in the sky was reflected in the silvery water, and along the banks the reflected trees and hills were displayed in fantastic forms.

From the merry throng, the night was broken by lively song and peals of laughter, but Jean and the maiden in the bow of his canoe sat silent and still. The scene was too beautiful to be profaned by

words.

When the trip was ended, Jean handed Ula into her buggy. They had not spoken of the past; they did not speak of the future; the present was enough. Jean rode home on Red Buck, seeing visions of pine forests haunted by beautiful maidens with dark blue eyes and sun-kissed golden hair, and all the world looked glad.





CHAPTER XII

THE PANTHER HUNT

oring. The maples in the valley and the hickories on the hillside had donned their golden hues. The grass on the mountain slopes was browning and the fields had yielded their harvest. Nature was preparing for her annual rest.

Jean Carroll had spent a very busy summer managing the farm work, gathering the harvest and caring for the cattle on the ranges. But the summer's labors were completed, the cattle no longer strayed away, but gathered in herds for the winter. At last the farmer could rest from toil.

Jean came in from the barn one morning and found Jaques Murray seated on the south porch enjoying the morning air. He motioned Jean to his side.

"Jean, my boy, you are looking tired and worried. Are you feeling well?"

"Yes, grandfather; I feel well all the time."

"I was afraid you had worked too hard this summer. You are strong, but not toughened to work, after your years in school. The summer's work is over now, and I want you to take more time for rest and pleasure. You have not spent much time with

friends since your return. You must rest up and

enjoy yourself."

"I don't think I need the rest, grandfather, and it is enough enjoyment to be home with you and among our beloved hills; but I had thought of spending to-day in the woods. I know where a panther dens, and thought I would like to go and

see if I could get a shot."

"A day in the woods will do you good, and I hope you will be able to kill the cat. They are a great drawback to sheep raising here. I needn't tell you to use care; you know more of the woods now than I do. You inherited that faculty from your father's family. Who's going with you, Jean?"

"I thought I'd go by after Bert Hawley. He

loves to hunt, and will go if he can get away."

"Yes; and Bert is a careful fellow. Jean, have you met our new neighbors, the Deans?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am glad you have. I met them for the first time yesterday. Mr. and Mrs. Dean and their daughter Ula and their kinsman, Mr. Rogers, called yesterday while you were in the field. They seem very nice people and are well pleased with the country."

"Yes; they seem well pleased here."

"They invited us to visit them, Jean. I excused myself on account of my health, but promised them that you would call."

"I will, grandfather; I believe I'll invite Mr.

Rogers to hunt the cats with us to-day."

"That would be friendly. He says he dearly loves the woods. He is a botanist, and is making a collection of the plant life of the Ozarks. He may find some rare plant in the forest. There is a great variety of ferns in the pine woods."

"Yes, I'll invite him to go with us. An extra man or two in a cat hunt might prove handy. Don't

look for me back until late."

Jean shouldered his big Winchester and took the trail over the mountain to Bert Hawley's home. To-day he was in a pensive mood, and felt that he would like to be alone, but he had promised Bert that he should go with him on the hunt. Besides, he had found that he was stronger when he controlled his moods, instead of letting them control him. The panther hunt would help him. He needed hard work to drive other thoughts from his mind, and the panther was likely to give him all he desired.

Bert was at the old log barn caring for some of the stock, but dropped everything and started for his gun when he saw Jean coming.

"Hello, Bert, are you ready for that panther

hunt?" Jean called.

"I'm always ready for a hunt," Bert replied; "anyway, if it's something that will show fight, and the cats'll shore give us something to do."

"I guess they will, Bert; and if you don't care, I'm going to invite Martin Rogers to go with us."

"That's just the thing. He's been wanting to go coon huntin' with me some night, but this will beat a coon hunt clear out of the woods. I'll get my

gun and I'm ready. Must I take the dogs?" he asked when he had again joined Jean.

"I don't believe we will need them. They'll only

make a noise and might get cut to pieces."

"Well, then, I'm ready; but I believe the dogs

would come in handy."

"I think not. If we had to locate the game, then the dogs would be all right; but we know where the cats are and the dogs might scare them."

"Jean, I wouldn't worry too much about the critters gettin' scared; the scarin's liable to be the other

way."

Jean led the way down the trail toward the Dean farm. They drifted into silence, Jean not caring to talk, and for some time he followed the narrow path, Bert close behind. After they had crossed the creek into the darkest part of the forest, Bert suddenly stammered: "Jean, you've been to college, do you know how to tell when a girl's in love?"

At another time Jean would have laughed aloud at the strange, droll question, but this morning the moodiness of the savage was upon him, and he

only smiled as he answered:

"You've got me, Bert; I don't believe I can solve that riddle. They didn't treat of love in my school."

"This is no riddle, Jean. I'm in earnest."

"Oh, that is different; I thought it was a riddle. What is it you want to know? I'll tell you if I can."

"I want to know just what I said. I'll just tell you all about it. You know, Jean, how me an' Cora—Cora Bain, you know—has been kinder goin'

together to meetin's an' parties since McFadden's barn raisin' last spring. Well, she's been awful good to me, but I'm afraid she don't love me. I'd give anything to find out."

"Have you asked her, Bert?"

"No; I haven't told her anything."

"Well, Bert, you tell her you love her and then, if she loves you, you will know it. The question that is bothering you has bothered smarter men than either of us through all the ages. They want to know. They want to know without making the test. They want to know without taking the risk. Not only in matters of love, but in all other great questions. The solution to this problem marks the difference between the field hand and the farmer, the apprentice and the printer, the man and the master. The one wants to know; the other finds out. Bert, if I were you, I'd find out."

"I'll do it. I'll ask her Saturday night If she don't love me now she never will. I don't think love

comes; it just is."

"Yes, Bert, it just is. How much better place the world would be if every one realized that," and Jean walked on while his mind wandered back to his vision of the fire and the wood nymph of the

forest. Love just is.

Bert, his decision made, strode on behind his silent comrade, whistling a lively tune, little knowing he had in his homely language uttered one of the great truths of life: "Love just is." Nature plants it in the human heart. It springs to life and full maturity when its ideal is met.

Martin Rogers met the two friends at the Dean gate. He gladly accepted the invitation to go with

them to the woods.

"Yes, I'll be glad to go," he said. "I've been wanting to take a hunt through the big woods, but being no woodsman, I did not care to go alone. Do you think we can find the panthers?"

"Yes," said Jean; "we will most likely find one,

and perhaps more."

"What we want to do," said Bert, "is to be sure

to find them before they find us."

While Martin Rogers was dressing for the hunt Ula Dean came into the yard to speak to the boys.

"Mr. Rogers tells me you are going into the big pine woods to hunt a panther," she said. "Can't I go, too?"

"It certainly would be a pleasure to the rest of us," Jean replied; "but I fear the long walk would

be too tiresome."

"I'm a great walker and just love the woods.

Would I be so much in the way?"

"No, you won't be at all in the way, and if you will go with us we will not go to the big woods, but will hunt closer home. There might be danger for you at the panther's cave."

"No! no! I won't go if you change your plans. I want to see the great beasts conquered. I like

men who conquer things," said Ula eagerly.

"Oh, Martin," said Ula, as Mr. Rogers came from the house with his gun, "I've been teasing Mr. Carroll to let me go with you. Do you suppose I could? I'll try to keep out of the way."

"You need not ask Mr. Rogers," interrupted Jean. "We all want you to go if the trip will not be too hard."

"Thank you all. I'll ask father." A few minutes later Ula came dancing out dressed for the woods, a small lunch box dangling in her hand.

"Where's your gun?" asked Martin.

"I don't need a gun; I'll act as nurse. Here are

my supplies for the relief of the wounded."

The party at once started for the woods, Jean leading the way, Ula and Martin Rogers following, with Bert's short steps and long, swinging arms

bringing up the rear.

When he thought of it afterward, Jean could not tell how the forenoon passed. The others were laughing and talking along the way. He walked steadily on seeking the best paths, breaking the way; hearing all, but seeming to hear nothing. He liked Martin Rogers, but to-day envied him his free manners and ready wit. Even dull, clumsy Bert was adding more pleasure to the party than himself.

At noon they stopped at a little spring far up the mountain side and ate the lunch Ula had prepared. Bert added to the lunch some fine mountain huckleberries, which grew near by. Jean ate but little; it seemed sacrilege to eat of food from such fair hands. Ula could scarcely eat for very happiness. The experiences were all new to her, and she never tired of the beautiful, ever-changing scenery. At their feet, as they ate, lay a lovely valley, narrow and steep near by, but ever widening until it lost itself in the hazy distance.

"How beautiful," Ula murmured. "So great and grand; so pure and good. How could one do wrong

with such surroundings?"

"Surroundings do not make the man," Jean replied. "They only strengthen the power for good or evil within him. His disposition gives this power its direction."

"Surroundings furnish opportunities," said the girl, "and nature in its purity around us furnishes us material for good, pure thoughts—the stones

of which character is builded."

Bert interrupted the conversation by saying: "It's time we were going, if we don't want to stay all night."

Jean again led the way into the woods.

The knob was soon reached, on the side of which the cave was located. The party approached the opening as quietly as possible, but no panther was to be seen.

The cave was an opening under a rocky ledge, slightly up the side of the hill. Near the cave a spring of water bubbled forth.

"There's nothing in sight," whispered Jean. "I suppose some of us will have to go into the den

and see what we can find."

Bert was already busy making preparations by gathering pine knots for a torch. This he lighted ready for the start.

"Can I go along, too?" asked Ula.

"No; I think we may find the game at home in there, and have some trouble with it. Mr. Rogers will stay out with you," Jean replied.

"No, that won't do; I'll stay alone," Ula inter-

posed. "I promised not to be in the way."

"You won't be in the way. Some one must stay out, anyway, to guard our way of retreat. His duty will be to kill whatever comes out and not let anything in."

"Jean, will you let me go in instead of Bert; I want to see the fighting?" Martin asked.

"All right, if that suits you and Bert; but, remember, the cave may be a mean place in which to

fight."

"I'll stay out if you want to go in," Bert assured Martin. "I'm not hunting a panther fight in a dark cave. Jean, loan Miss Dean your gun. You can't handle it and the light, too, and we may need all the arms we can get out here." This arrangement was agreeable to all, and the two men entered the cave, Jean crawling ahead, Martin following close behind. They soon announced to those outside that they had reached standing room.

Bert placed himself near the entrance. "Now, Miss Ula, you watch the outside and I'll watch the cave," he said, and seated himself facing the

hole.

The two men in the cave advanced side by side as the opening became larger. The pine torch threw a blinding glare close around them, while the edges of the cave were shrouded in darkness. Jean examined with searching eyes each nook and corner. He looked well to the front; all was darkness. No, there was a gleam of light. There, from a large bowlder, showed two balls of fire. Never moving,

never quivering, the great cat waited, measuring

the distance for a spring.

Jean touched Martin on the shoulder and nodded towards the crouching brute. Martin raised his rifle, took careful aim and fired. A deafening report filled the cave, followed by a horrible scream as the great cat sprang into the air to fall down dead across the cavern floor. A few feet farther back, crouched in a niche in the wall, were found the young; two furry, yellow balls, with ears back and eyes snapping. Jean caught up the squirming, scratching kits and Martin the body of the dead mother and they started for the cave's entrance.

When they reached the mouth of the cave, Jean turned the kittens over to Bert and Martin, and began to take off the skin of the dead panther as a trophy of the hunt. Martin and Bert laid down their guns and began fondling the young animals, while Ula kept her place as she had stood, gun in hand. The kitten Martin held tried to escape, but, failing in that, clawed at his arm, uttering a long, plaintive wail. There was an answering cry from a crevice in the rocks near by, and then, without further warning a long, lithe body shot through the air straight at Martin's throat. Jean saw the spring, but had no time to arm himself. He had only time to rise and throw himself, with the old football tackle, straight at the flying beast. They met in the air, and went down together, the panther underneath, but with its mighty jaws fastened in Jean's shoulder. The enraged animal made a stroke with its strong hind claws, cutting Jean's clothing as with

a knife. The next instant Jean's right arm twisted itself around the sinewy body and pinned it fast beneath him.

The attack had come like a thunder-bolt. Martin stood almost paralyzed. Bert jumped for his gun, but the kitten, as he threw it aside, snapped his hand, and delayed him. The struggle on the ground was a fight to the death. Slowly Jean was pressing the life out of the beast, but the pain in his shoulder was telling, and the great cat was straining every muscle to reach his bare throat, with its swiftly working jaws getting closer and closer each trial. Its hot, angry breath was stifling him. Then Martin Rogers, who could do nothing but watch, saw a change come over Jean's face. The look of surprise left and a look of defiance came. His muscles tightened until the bones of the beast cracked. Then there was a shot and the jaws of the animal relaxed.

Jean slowly rose, his clothing torn into shreds and the blood streaming from his wounded shoulder. Ula Dean was standing close by the animal's head

with Jean's smoking rifle in her hands.

"Oh, Jean, are you—" but she faltered. The man before her was a stranger. The face had lost its smoothness, the eyes had lost their blue. Instead was the square-set jaw, the cold eye and the stolid expression of the savage.

Martin sprang to his aid and Bert caught his arm, but he shook them off and walked down to the stream alone, pulled the shredded coat from his shoulder and washed the blood away. For a few

minutes he cleansed the wounded shoulder, then bathed his face and hands in the cooling stream, and rising, looked away through the murmuring pines. When he turned to his friends he was his old self again.

"Forgive me, boys, for acting rude," were his first words. "I did not mean it. Miss Ula, I want to thank you for coming to my aid. That was a

good shot."

"Jean Carroll," said Martin, "don't ask my forgiveness for anything you have done or may do. I must first thank you for saving my life. I could not have held that great beast until help came."

"I've got nobody to thank or to thank me," said Bert. "I just stood here like a monkey and did nothing, and it ought to have been my fight. I

was left to guard the outside."

Jean could but laugh at Bert's drollery as he said: "It seems you had good help; Miss Ula lost no time."

"Yes, I did lose time," Ula said. "I was afraid I'd hit you, Mr. Carroll. Now you must have your shoulder dressed."

"All right; if Bert will skin our victims. I'm

glad we got them, anyway."

Bert set about removing the skins and Ula collected the handkerchiefs of the party and made bandages for Jean's shoulder, while Martin took the remainder of Jean's coat and made a bag in which the young panthers were bundled.

When they were all ready, Bert slung the hides on his back, hung the bag containing the kittens on

his gun barrel, and led the way off down the mountain side. Ula wanted to carry Jean's gun, but after a short distance he took it from her shoulder, saying: "That's too big a load for you. It hurts me worse to see you carry it than to carry it myself."

"It was getting heavy, Mr. Carroll," Ula replied. They walked on through the woods, Jean laughing and talking with the others in a much lighter mood

than on the outward journey.

Ula spoke but few words on the homeward trip. The excitement and danger had left her feeling serious and subdued. Occasionally she glanced at the face of the wounded man, fearing, yet almost hoping, she would again see the change upon it—the change from the laughing face of a friend to the powerful visage of a maddened savage.

Before they reached the Dean farm the sun had set and the moon had risen above the pines. They were traveling a steep ridge that led down to the valley road near home, when a body of horsemen came clattering down the valley below them. The leader was a large man wearing a black slouch hat.

All the men wore black masks.

Ula glanced at Jean and was about to ask what it all meant, but stopped. Over his face was creeping a shadow of the savage cast of the afternoon. With the passing of the horsemen the shadow disappeared.

"A bunch of Bald-knobbers. Some poor man will suffer to-night for what he may or may not have

done," was Jean's only comment.

At the Dean gate Jean offered to Ula and Martin

the panther skins as their share of the hunt. Martin accepted with thanks the skin of his panther he had killed, but Ula refused the other, saying Jean must take it as a memento of his wound. Jean did not insist and left for home. As they went Ula called out: "Thank you, Mr. Carroll, for a pleasant day, except for one thing. I hope your shoulder will soon be well."

Jean did not reply. He wondered if that "one thing" was the wound in his shoulder or his passion

after the fight.

"Jean," said Bert, after walking some distance in silence, "if Cora Bain loves me I'm going to sell these little 'devils' to a show and get money to get an outfit."

GRANNY MOON'S COVE



CHAPTER XIII

GRANNY MOON'S COVE

N the midst of a pine forest, miles in extent, inhabited, at the time of our story, only by the wild things of the forest, lay a fertile cove, a freak of Nature, a tract of bottom land surrounded by mountains on every side—a bottom without a river; a valley without an outlet. The cove contained about twenty acres, "as fine land as ever a crow flew over," said Granny Moon, the first settler. This valley was a grass-covered vale, devoid of timber, while on every side the mountains, linked into a solid mass,

were densely timbered.

Granny Moon's cove, as the place was called, was a noted spot in the Ozark country, not only from its peculiar formation, but from its past and present inhabitants. Granny Moon lived in the cove when the oldest inhabitant had come to the country. She was supposed to have been the first settler in the Ozarks. Her husband had been killed by the Indians, and if she had any children they had long since died, or left, never to return. In a little cabin on the side of the cove, near a spring which flowed from the side of the mountain, ran a few yards and sank into the earth, she lived alone. She kept no horse, no cow, no dog or other living thing about

her, but farmed a small patch with a hoe and helped to eke out a scant living by "helpin' other human critters into and out of this changin' old world." She was a fortune teller, a "yarb" doctor and a reputed witch; her witchcraft reputation coming from her complete disappearance from view when she had once entered her cabin.

An old hunter first discovered her invisibility when he knocked at her door directly after he had seen her enter the cabin. She did not answer and he pushed the door open and looked in. She was nowhere to be seen. He entered the room; there was no hiding place and no outlet. He fled to the hillside shaking with superstitious fear. A few moments later she appeared in the doorway. That was enough for the hunter, he left for the settlements.

When the neighbors accused her of being a witch she mysteriously replied: "If the busybodies don't

let me alone they'll disappear, too."

A few years later she disappeared altogether. A dozen men—a smaller number were afraid to go—went to her cabin to look for her. Her door was locked on the inside. They burst in the door. The room was empty. They quickly left and all breathed freer when the mountainside was well between them and the cabin.

For years the cabin remained empty. Granny Moon's cove, the haunted cove, as it was sometimes called, was the foundation of many blood-curdling stories of ghosts, spirits and witches. Any settler would ride miles out of his way to keep from passing the place alone.

There was great surprise when a hunter saw smoke drifting from the chimney of the old cabin. A few days later another hunter saw a man leave the cove, a tall man, nearly seven feet, but slim and ungainly. He gave the name of Murphy. When asked where he came from he answered: "I didn't come from nowhar, and I'm not goin' back." He gave out no other information.

To distinguish him from some Murphys in another part of the county he was dubbed "Skinny" Murphy. Skinny's reputation for "secret doin's" was soon no better than had been Granny Moon's. Many superstitious ones believed he was old Granny

come back in a different form.

Skinny improved the farm by breaking out a few acres more land and building a strong spring house over the spring. He raised corn in his field, hunted a little, but spent hours and hours in the spring house, and all the while smoke curled from the chimney of the cabin. Smoke from witch fire, some said.

Skinny's distance from neighbors and his questionable reputation kept visitors away from him. If he had visitors no one saw them come or go;

they must have come from the world below.

About dark, one day a few weeks after the panther hunt, Skinny might have been seen standing just inside the low spring-house door, stooping half over to see out, his roving eyes shifting from side to side of the cove. He looked like some caged animal.

Presently there came down from the near-by

mountainside a man armed with a revolver and wearing a mask. He whispered a word to the grotesque doorkeeper and passed in. Other masked and armed men followed until it seemed the little house must be full, still they came. At last Skinny closed the door from the inside and barred it.

When the first comer reached the interior of the spring house he seemed to be in a solid building, but he walked to the back and inserted his fingers into a crack between two boards and pulled. A rude door opened and he stepped into a passage that led into the hillside. The door swung shut behind him. He passed through a long, dark tunnel and out into

an open cave. The others followed.

The cave was well lighted by tallow candles placed here and there on the wall, the light reflecting from thousands of glittering particles in the wall and ceiling. In the centre of the cave was the source of the spring which flowed out through the spring house. It was a stream of sparkling water falling from the roof above. Its constant fall had hollowed out a circular basin in the level floor. This stone was about three feet in diameter, and hollowed out like a basin at the top—a complete fountain formed by the hand of Nature.

At the side of the cave was a stone fireplace on which stood an old-fashioned copper still, used for distilling alcohol and whisky. A slow fire kept its contents at a grumbling boil. The boiling liquid in the weird surroundings might have been taken for

a "witch's pot" of old.

In the other side of the cave the men congregated

until they numbered about twenty, among them a large man who seemed to be leader. When all had gathered, this man moved to one side and all the others in turn stepped up to him, raised their masks for an instant and were passed on. When the last man had passed, the leader announced that all were members and asked them to be seated.

"Boys," he began, "we are here to-night to consider certain questions. Some want to shut down the coffee-mill over there and go into a better business; a business that will make us more money

and be much easier. What have you to say?"

A man toward the back of the cave rose and said: "Fellow clansmen, before you go into the discussion of this matter I wish to make a request of you. I know what your proposed change is, and I do not approve of it. It will mean trouble and detection, but before I go further I will state my case. For years I have been a faithful member of the clan. I was one of the men who proposed its organization. I attended its first meeting. I have grown old in the cause. I have never failed to respond to the clan's demands, but now I want to quit, and ask that my name as an active member be dropped from the list."

The leader sprang to his feet. "Boys," he began excitedly, "you hear what he says. He asks what is impossible. There is no use in dallying about this matter. The man who wants to quit is Chris Ming. I know what's the matter with him. He wants to please that fop, Jean Carroll, our worst enemy. I know what he would do as soon as he was released.

He would tell the 'half-breed' all about our plans, if he has not already told him, as I believe he has.

We won't listen to his application."

The applicant, Chris Ming, for it was no other, rose to his feet and there was much feeling in his voice as he addressed the men: "Fellow clansmen, I have been charged with having betrayed my trust and accused of wanting to betray the clan and blamed for being friendly with an outside man. I am a friend to this man; but have never, and will never, betray the clan's secrets. All I ask is that I be dropped out and not forced to do acts I do not approve. I objected to the still because it was a violation of law, and you overruled me, saying whisky would only be made for members. It was started, and whisky is made for sale to all who will buy. Now you propose to go into counterfeiting, which means trouble. I for one will always oppose it. You may refuse to let me out, but my oath does not bind me to work except for the good of the community, and I will have nothing to do with it."

"We have had enough of this racket," said the chairman. "Boys, the question is this: shall we go into this money-making business, all who are here being alike concerned. It is much safer than operating the still, for it is troublesome getting corn in here. With the metal there will be no trouble. All

who favor it say 'aye'."

There was a loud chorus of "ayes," and a distinct "no," with a few followers.

"The question is carried," announced the chair-

man. "Now, boys, the work will commence. We already have enough metal for the first trial, and Skinny's got the molds at hand, and by the next meeting we will have a small fortune for every man.

"Before we go I want to say one word," he continued. "There is one man in this county we must watch. He is working for our ruin, but we must get him first. That man is Jean Carroll, and the clan offers one hundred dollars to the one who will find a cause for compelling him to leave the country. Remember, he's a sly and dangerous man, but we'll get the d——d half-breed yet."

"Bud Jones," came a voice from the back of the crowd, "such words are unworthy to come from the lips of a clansman, as is the order just adopted to engage in counterfeiting. You refuse to let me out of the clan, and I refuse to abide by the clan's orders when they order me to do what I know to be

wrong."

"Chris Ming," the leader spoke hotly, "you have said too much. If there's another word or a single act of disobedience of the clan's orders you will be tried as a traitor. Am I right, boys?"

There was a half-hearted answer of "yes."

"You know what the result would be," the leader continued. "Keep your oath and there'll be no trouble; shirk, and you take the consequences. Jim, where's Skinny?"

"He's watching the door," said one of the clan.

"Go and relieve him, and send him here."

In a few minutes the tall, ungainly form came

shuffling into the light, the only man present unmasked, his little beadlike eyes shifting from side to side of the cave.

"Skinny, how's the work progressing?" the leader

asked.

"Getting along very well; but we'll have to shut down if we don't get more jugs. Everything's about full."

"Well, bring us out one of the best, we'll make

room for a little more."

The man shambled off to the rear of the light and soon came back with a gallon jug. "Here's some, cap, so rich you'll have to bite it off to quit. It's strictly moonshine whisky, made by moonshine, from red corn stolen from a moony farmer on a moonshiny night. It's Skinny Murphy's best."

moonshiny night. It's Skinny Murphy's best."

"Good for you, Skinny. Here's to you, and the rest of the boys," and the leader took a big drink from the jug and passed it to another. "Now, Murphy, that's good stuff, but we're going to quit this business and go into something better. You know what I mean. We're going to make the coin direct instead of making moonshine and selling it for coin. You may finish filling the jugs, then set the still in the back cave and go on with the other work."

"All right, cap, I can make it; but you're going to have to handle it more careful. Moonshine whisky's as good as government as soon as you get it outside, but moonshine money's always bad. It's caused me to make some very sudden moves, and I don't want to leave these comfortable quarters."

"Oh, hush your croaking, Skinny. If you don't, I'm going to look up your back record and report

you."

"A few days after that happens, there'll be a carcass found rotting on the hillside, and it'll be an uncommon big one, too," Skinny retorted, and his long, bony fingers noiselessly handled a big revolver at his belt. "I'm living in the present, and object to any ref'rance to the past."

"Oh, dry up, Skinny, I was only joking. You make the wagon wheels for us and we'll do the rest. Boys, how do you like Skinny's best?" The jug had passed around and been tried by all but Chris Ming. He realized his danger, and wanted

all his wits to keep clear of the pitfalls.

"Did you hear of the panther cave?" said one of the men. "It must have been around here somewhere. Do you know whar it is, Skinny?"

"Yes. It's just over the other side of the moun-

tain. I heard their guns."

"Were they that close?" Bud asked. "What was Jean Carroll doing rambling around on this side?"

"Maybe he was watching some of us," suggested

one.

"I wish I could catch him at it," declared the big leader, "he'd find I'd 'bite' deeper than the cat did. Rules or no rules, he'd never get a trial."

"He'd better never follow me home," said a short,

heavy-set man in a gruff voice.

"You'd never know it," said Bud. "The d——d Indian can slip around like a cat and he'd have the government down on us to catch us one by one."

"Then why don't we go and get him out of the way now?" another asked.

"I'm willing," said Bud. "What do the rest of

you say?"

"Don't do it, boys," said Skinny. "We'll lose more than we'll gain. He's got lots of friends. That young Rogers is one of them. He might notify the government and they'd send officers after us. We don't want officers outside our county boys looking for us. Wait till we git an excuse and we'll send him a-kitin'."

"All right," said Bud, "there's no danger here from the money business, for we're goin' to use it a long way off, and there's no immediate danger from the 'half-Indian,' unless some one tells, and if they do, we'll eat their heart at the next meeting," and

he looked menacingly at Chris.

"That's right," answered several others. The liquor had begun to tell, and they were soon all talking, the noise getting louder and more boisterous.

After a while Bud called for order. "Now, boys, we're going home. Go out one at a time, go straight to your horses and ride straight home. If any one follows, see that he never tells. Meet here again at the regular time."

One by one the masked men stooped into the dark entrance and passed into the spring house,

where Skinny let them out.

Chris started among the first, but Bud stopped

him, and the two passed out together.

When they had mounted, Bud said: "Chris, I don't want to be hard on you, but have to seem so

and I must not seem to trust you. Chris, you know how I love Mollie, and if she was my wife the boys would feel satisfied. Then I could get you released."

"But Mollie's her own mistress. I can't give her

to you or to any one else."

"You mean you won't try, Chris Ming. I'm going to have her for a wife. If I don't, you will pay the penalty."

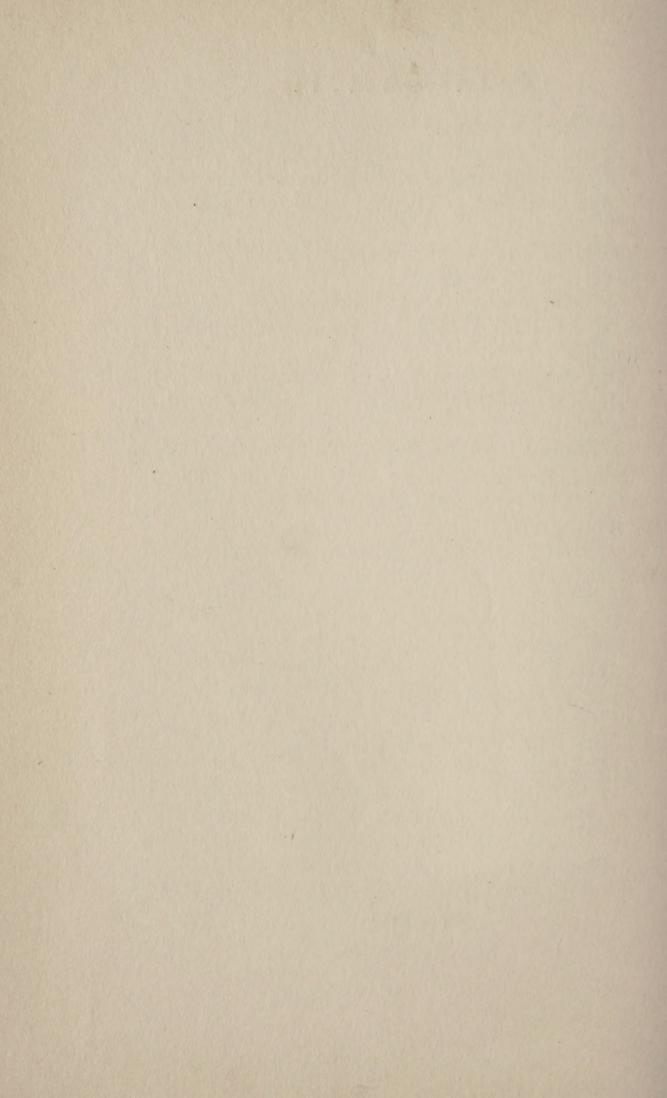
"Bud Jones, you may do what you will to me, I won't sell my daughter. No; not to save my worth-

less life."

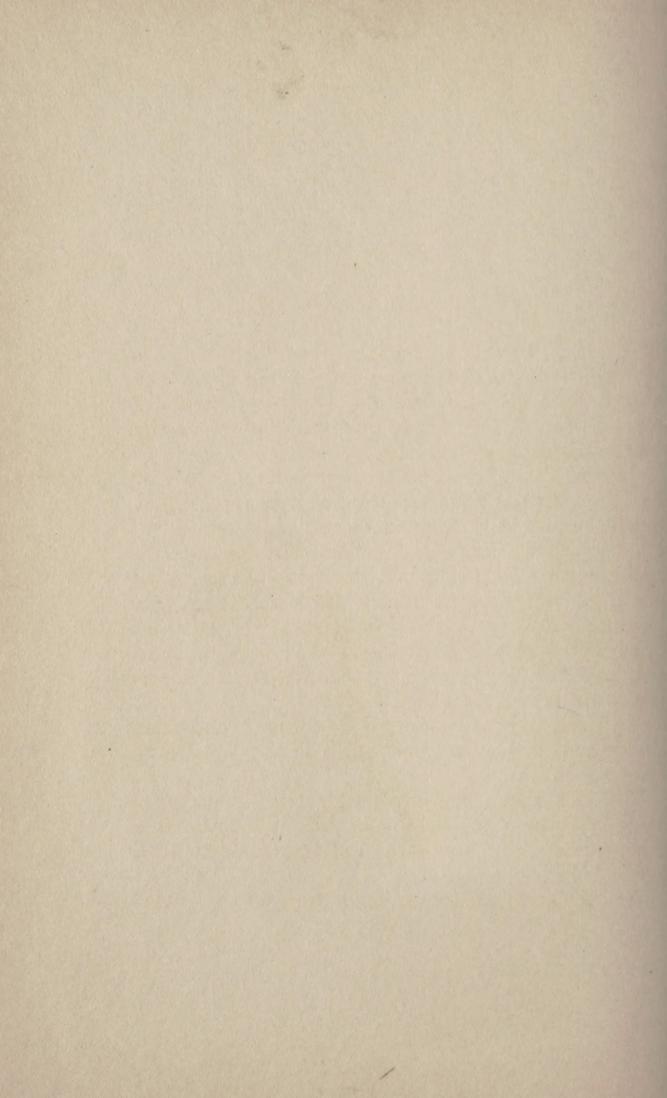
"It's not your worthless life you'd be saving. It's your honor and her honor. Oh! does that appeal to you? Well, you needn't answer now. Just be at the next meeting."

They parted, Chris to go home to a sleepless

night.



MOLLIE IS ENGAGED



CHAPTER XIV

MOLLIE IS ENGAGED

JEAN'S wounded shoulder soon healed. The teeth of the beast had only made sharp cuts into the flesh. The shoulder was not badly torn or bruised, and within a fortnight every vestige

of the toothmarks had disappeared.

Jaques Murray was ill, and for several days Jean had been kept at home. It was fine hunting weather, but he remained close to the house and attended his aged relative's every want. Three weeks after the panther hunt had elapsed before the grandfather could go as far as the sunny porch. After he had been helped to his easy-chair he said: "Jean, I feel much better this morning, and while you can leave you had better go out into the ranges and see if the cattle get plenty of good grass."

"All right, grandfather, I'll go now," and Jean shouldered his rifle and started for the cattle

ranges.

Here he found that Mollie had taken the bucket and gone to the spring for water and hurried away after her.

At the spring he found her sitting on the grassy [165]

bank of the stream with a far-away look in her eyes as she twisted into cornucopias some golden autumn leaves. She did not know of Jean's presence until he said: "A penny for your thoughts, Mollie."

Mollie sprang to her feet, blushed and stammered: "Oh, Jean, you almost frightened me, it's

been so long since I saw you."

"I would have been over sooner," answered Jean, "but grandfather has been sick, and I was kept at home. Why do you never come over to see grandfather?"

"It seems I haven't time any more—I have so much to do. Mother is not strong now, and father has to be away so much, looking after the cattle, and he don't like for me to go away from home alone any more."

"Well, we're together now, and I suppose we can visit to make up for lost time," said Jean, as he and Mollie found seats on the grassy slope. "Have you

seen Bud Jones about lately?"

"I haven't seen him for some time, still I believe he is causing father trouble. The other day, when some one spoke Bud's name I could see that it hurt father to think of him."

"I'll tell you what must be done. Bud Jones and his crowd of bullies must be stopped or the country will be ruined."

"Well, Jean, you're just the man to stop them. You ought to have no trouble with a few Bald-knobbers; a man who can, empty-handed, whip a panther."

"Who told you about that?"

"Mr. Rogers came over a day or two after the hunt and told me all about it. He thinks you're a great fellow. He just bragged about you until I felt squeamish; but wasn't it plucky of Ula to shoot the panther?"

"Yes, and I'm very thankful, for she saved me a hard tussle, if not my life; but I don't think Martin

did fair by telling you first."

"Well, he told me, and I couldn't help it," and after a moment's hesitation added: "Say, Jean, I've something to tell you, if you'll promise not to tell any one."

"Why, Mollie, what is it that requires such a promise? Surely you can trust me with your se-

cret."

"Well, Jean, what I am going to tell you is just so awfully good. I'm engaged!"

"Who to, Mollie? It's not Bud Jones, is it?"

"Oh, no," cried Mollie, "not to him. But can't you guess who? One of the nicest men. No? It's Martin Rogers."

"Martin Rogers! Oh, Mollie, that's good," and

Jean extended his heartiest congratulations.

The conversation continued for some time, but it seemed Jean could not collect his thoughts, and he

excused himself to go in search of the cattle.

As they parted Mollie said: "Jean, you ought to love some one. It's so—I can't tell what—to be in love and to know you are loved. Why don't you love Martin's cousin, Ula? She's such a nice, sweet girl. I'm sure she would love you if you'd let her,

and I don't want her to go with that braggart, Bud Jones. He was over to see her last Sunday."

But Jean's only answer was: "I guess such things

are not for me, Mollie."

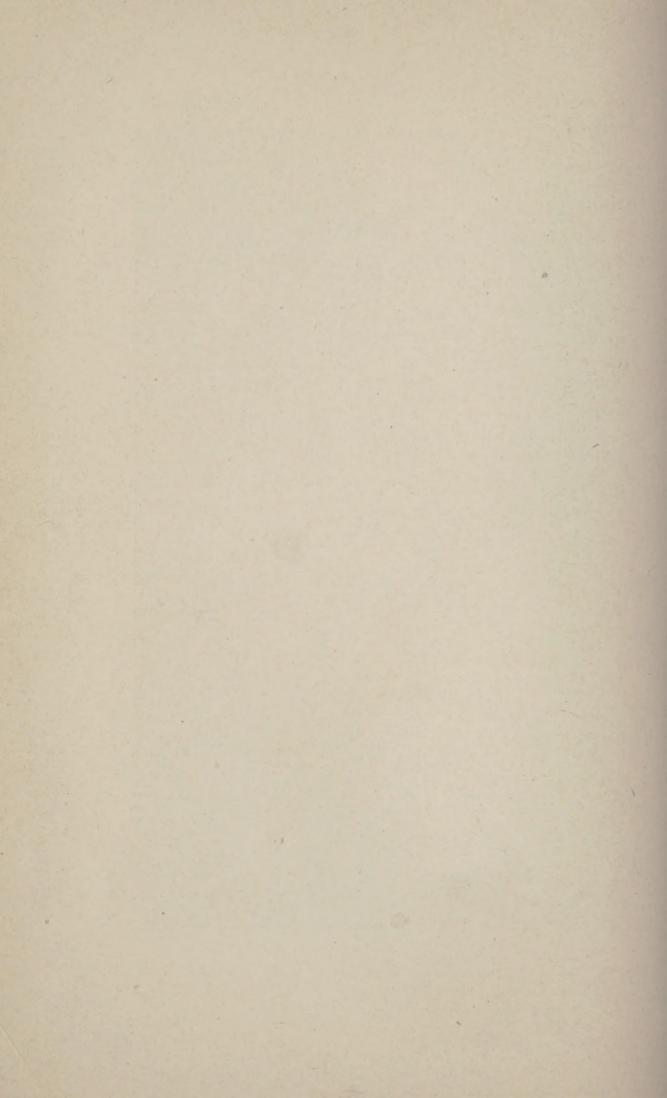
Jean strode away into the woods deep in thought, his brain in a whirl, forgetting the ranges, forgetting the cattle. One thought was uppermost in his mind, and that was that Martin Rogers loved Mollie Ming and did not love Ula Dean. Could it be possible that Ula could some day love him, Jean Carroll? No; such a thought was too sacred to be entertained. He stopped, then repeated to himself: "I love Ula Dean." He knew it now; knew that he loved her so well that he preferred her happiness to his own. And now the thought came to him that maybe she loved Martin Rogers and would be unhappy, or, worst thought of all, she might love Bud Jones.

After a long walk he stopped in a grove of pines and seated on a grassy knoll he listened for the cattle bells, but heard instead the music of the pines, the chorus overhead, and the music was different from the songs the pines had sung on former days. He could still hear the birds singing, the cattle lowing, the fox-hounds running, but above all, and sweeter than all was the song of love—the sweetest music ever heard. There in the great forest, surrounded by Nature in her purity, he sat, a dreamer, and dreamed his first dream of love, and in his dreams he knew he had always loved Ula Dean. Had loved her before the canoeing party; had loved her before the meeting in the moonlight; had loved



There in the great forest surrounded by nature in her beauty, he sat, a dreamer, and dreamed his first dream of love.

(Jean Carroll.)—P. 168.

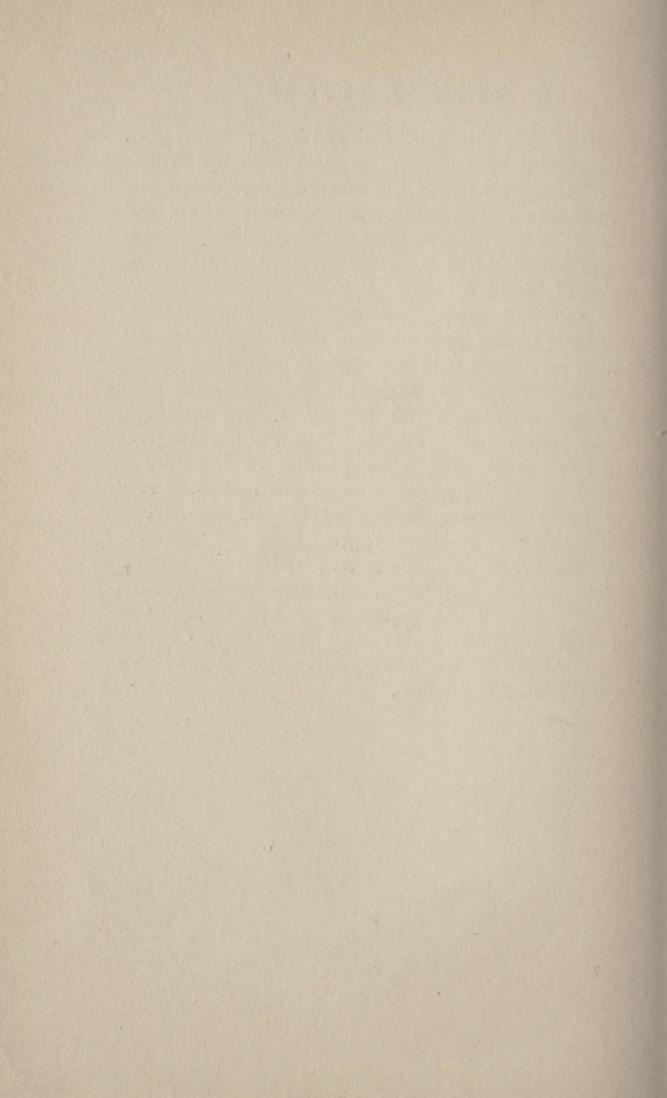


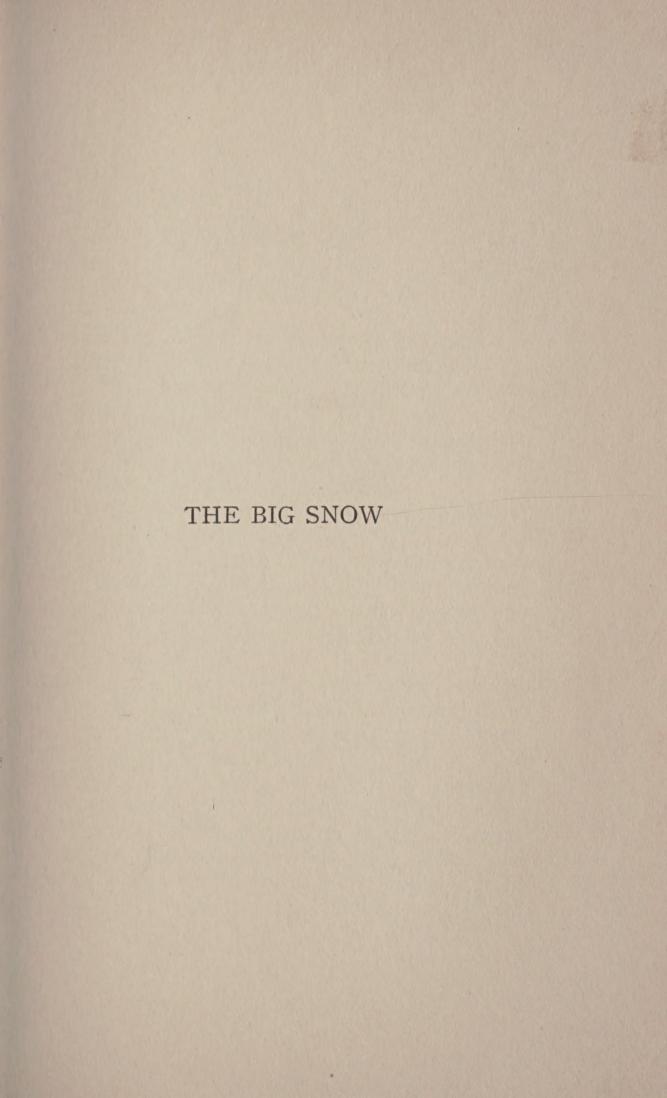
her before that glimpse of clear blue eyes and sunkissed golden hair. Then, drifting into the beliefs of his savage ancestors, he knew he had loved her in other ages and other forms since time began, and he knew he would love her, must love her, so long as time lasted. She was his ideal, his affinity, his other self, his love.

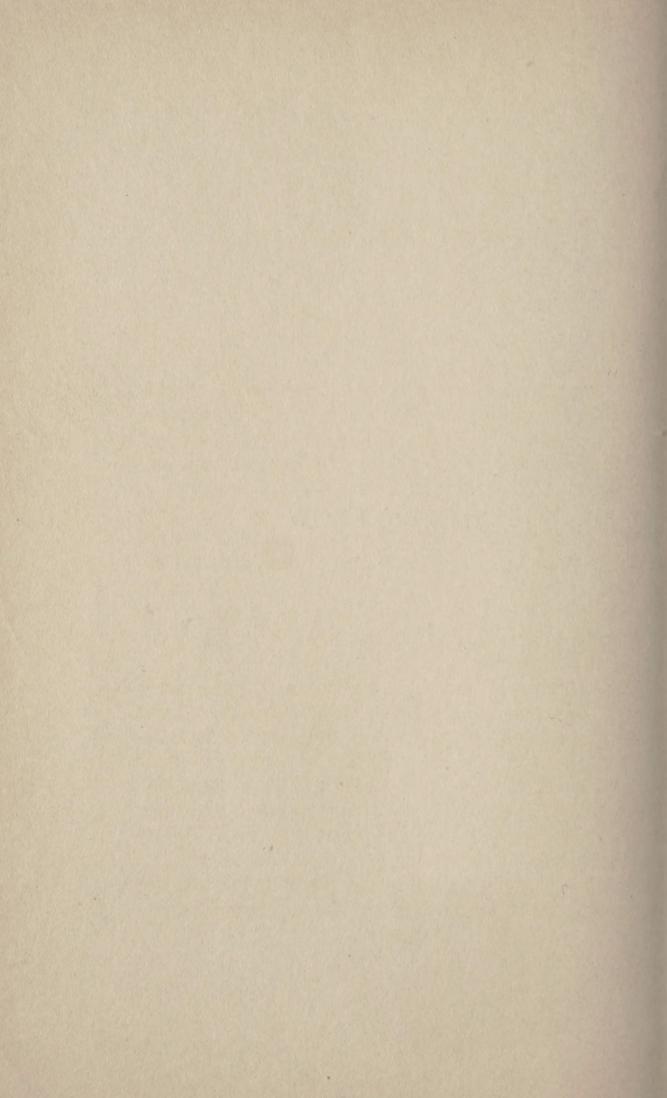
He awoke from his dream. He could hear the cattle bells in the valley below. He started toward them, a new spring in his step, a new light in his eyes, a new purpose in his life. He loved, and with that love his life was full, his nature was complete.

Jean found the cattle fat upon the ranges and turned his steps homeward to find the horses had escaped from the pasture. Some one had purposely torn down the fence. It was far into the night when the last of them had been returned.

He came into the house and ate a cold supper, tired in body and mind, but he had decided on his course. Ula Dean's happiness should be more to him than his own. Bud Jones deserved to be punished for his acts, but he should be spared until sure Ula did not care for him.







CHAPTER XV

THE BIG SNOW

THE snow came down; first in large flakes with long intervals between, then smaller and more often, then settled down into a steady snowfall; the first of the season. The level meadow lands became glistening plains, the pine-covered hill-lands fantastic mountains; all the landscape presented a picture of purity and sublimity.

It was the middle of December, and for three days the snow fell without ceasing. The roads became blocked by snow, and later rendered impassable and useless by the bending trees. For the time, all travel in the Ozark country was stopped. In after years time was often reckoned from the win-

ter of the big snow.

Jean was ready for the big storm, and resigned himself to the confinement. Since the panther hunt he had spent his spare time in tanning and dressing the skin of the panther Ula had killed. Now that all outside work was suspended, he spent the whole day preparing the beautiful coat of fur for a rug. With the patience inherited from his savage ancestors, and the knowledge handed by them from generation to generation, he had made of it a thing of beauty. The inner surface was a velvety white;

the rich brown coat was polished and smoothed until it shone like the coat of a living animal.

From the first Jean had intended the rug as a present. He would give it to Ula Dean as a trophy of the hunt and a Christmas present from a friend.

At last the rug was completed, at least so far as dressing and polishing could go, but the snow still fell, and Jean determined to add to the value of the rug as a present by staining Ula's name upon the fur. Dyes were made from the bark of trees and shrubs, and on the inner fur the name was painted; painted so that it left no mark on the inner skin, but reflected the letters on the glossy coat, a darker shadow on a golden ground. The rug was finished and laid by for Christmas day.

During the whole time the snow had been falling the weather had remained warm, and after three days, when all the earth was wrapped deep in the snowy sheen, rain began to fall. All night long the patter of the rain was heard. When the morning came the snow was gone, but the whole bottom seemed a raging sea, and the rain was still pouring

down.

While at breakfast Jean was called to the door by Frank Jackson: "Jean, can you go with me to Big Island? The Widow Parnell is surrounded by water, which has already reached the cabin and is rising higher all the time."

"Yes, Frank," Jean quickly answered. "Hadn't I better get some ropes? I'll go to the barn for them," and getting the ropes they hurried away.

Big Island was a point on the river where at high

water the stream divided, cutting off the "island," which stood several feet above all known floods. On this island was a cabin and a few acres of cleared land; a squatter's cabin to be occupied by the first one finding it empty. The Widow Parnell

had occupied the place the past summer.

When Jean and Frank arrived they found an ever-increasing crowd gathered on their side of the river, while a like crowd could be seen on the opposite bank, all trying to devise some plan to rescue the threatened family. The water was still rising, and had now reached the door sill, and the frightened woman and little daughter were screaming with terror.

There was one canoe at hand, but as yet no one had dared attempt the rescue. Jean studied the stream closely for a few minutes, and then began preparing the ropes.

"Boys," he said, addressing the crowd, "if one of you will go with me we will try it. We'll tie the rope to the stern of the boat, and if we fail you who

are here can pull us out. Who will go?"

None came forward for a moment, then Bud Jones volunteered, and the two men took their places, Bud tying the rope to the boat before getting in. Bud pushed into the stream with an air of bravado, Jean with a determined face; neither spoke as each bent his shoulders to their work. The boat shot into the stream and the fight began.

Slowly they fought their way up the side of the turbulent stream, then began to slowly pull their way out into the current, the men on the bank pay-

ing out the rope as the boat proceeded. Suddenly a large tree tumbled into the river above them, was caught by the current and sent rolling over and

over toward the struggling boat.

Jean motioned for the men on the shore to pull them back out of danger, but before they could act Bud jumped over the stern, jerked the rope, which was slip-knotted, loose, and was drawn by the men out of danger, and soon to the shore. Jean stood as if paralyzed for an instant, then, just as the tree came crashing into the frail canoe, jumped clear, went down, came up shaking the water from his eyes, and struck for the shore. By the time Bud had climbed the bank, Jean was at the water's edge, none the worse for the adventure; but their only boat was gone.

"It was too bad," said Bud. "I saw the rope slip

and just had time to catch it."

"You lie, Bud Jones," replied Jean. "You jerked it loose with your own hand."

But started to reply, then saw Jean's face and pre-

tended not to hear.

Jean came up the bank, shook himself like some great animal, and began to rearrange the tangled rope. When his friends looked at him they almost shuddered. His face had changed from that of a man to the expression of a maddened animal. The eyes were snapping fire, the jaws were set together, and every muscle was tense and quivering. He spoke only to Frank Jackson, his voice sounding hollow and far-off.

"Frank, pay out the rope," Jean directed, as he fastened it to his belt and waded into the stream.

"Oh, Jean, you're not going to try to swim it," Frank called after him, but Jean did not answer, he only pushed on into the stream. The current buffeted him back, but his strong arms struck the flood blow for blow. Slowly and more slowly he advanced against the current as the rope dragged heavier and heavier. The stream was rapidly rising, and logs and drifts constantly threatened, but he dodged and turned and pulled on till at last the cabin was reached. A hearty cheer greeted him from the gathered men and women on either bank as he drew himself wearily upon the now hidden island.

He fell to work at once to rescue the imperiled ones. He pulled a bedstead to the door, cut it apart with an axe and tied the parts into a clumsy raft with its own cords. He next tied the straw mattress onto the improvised raft, mounted the woman and child upon it, bound them there with the bed clothing, and gave the signal for the men on the shore to pull.

Strong men gathered the rope and soon drew them swiftly to safety. They were under and out of the water many times before they landed, both badly frightened, but neither seriously injured. A hearty shout again rang out, then all eyes were

turned upon the rescuer.

He stood upon the highest point of the island, gaining all the rest possible before the return strug-

gle. Many shouted words of encouragement, but if he heard them above the river's roar he did not reply. The cabin, on lower ground, rose, turned, twisted about, and then tumbling apart, floated down the stream. He was left standing alone, the only object in the raging flood. He turned his face to the opposite shore, where, in front of the crowd at the water's edge, stood Ula Dean and Mollie Ming, arm in arm. They waved him encouragement. Those looking thought they saw the tense lines of his face soften as he recognized them. He made no reply, but turned and sprang far out into the stream.

The fight for life was on again. He dodged the drifting logs, then dived to escape a heavy drift and the watchers thought him lost. He came to the surface far down the stream, still headed for the shore. He was failing in strength and was carried farther and farther down, but at last landed and climbed the low bank.

A cheer of relief followed his safe return. Many had followed his course down the stream, but his progress was so rapid that none were just at hand when he landed. He raised himself up, shook the water from his torn clothing, then walked up the hill and was hidden in the forest.

Bud Jones and his followers laughed long and loud at his action. "Don't worry, boys," said Bud, "he's all right. He's only gone off by himself where he'll have good company. He don't want to associate with common farmers."

"Bud Jones," said old Hunter Jack, "a jackal

can laugh at the lion when the lion's gone, but it doesn't become him."

Watumska's spirit had done its duty, but it wanted and would receive no praise. The old savage spirit was on Jean. Bud Jones had played traitor again and the nature which said "forget and forgive" was down and the fighting spirit was in control. The influence of the great wild woods alone could lull it to sleep.

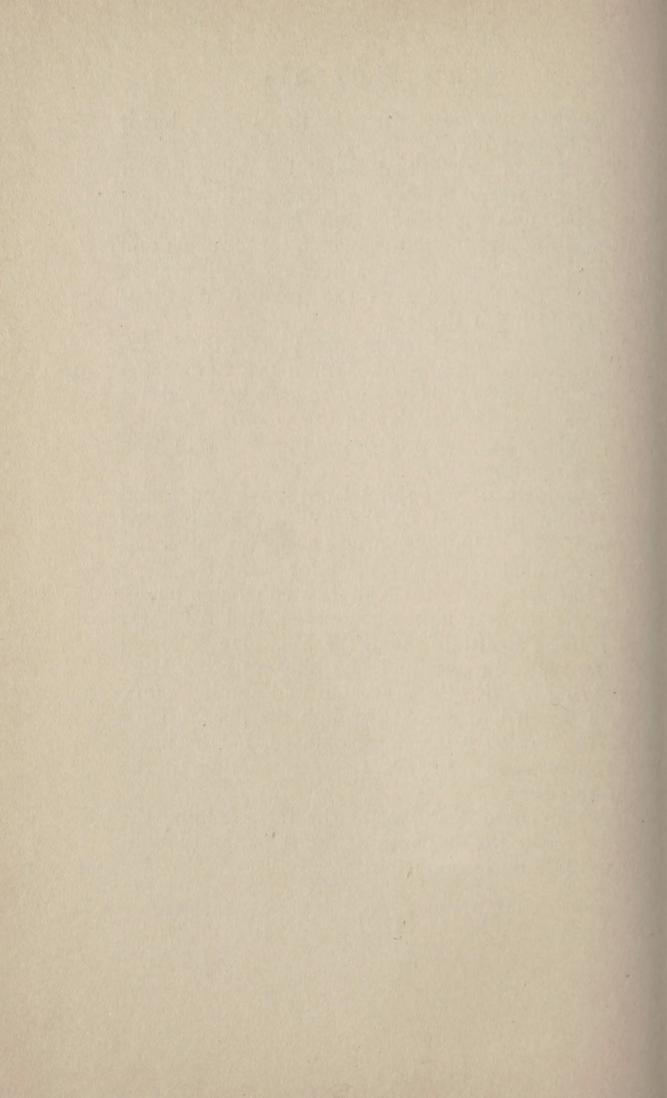
Jean hated himself for his acts; hated the weakness that would not allow him to go before the coward and ignore his cowardice, still he could not turn and he spent the day in the woods, tramping from hill to hill, beating down the desire to seek

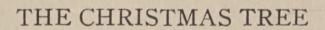
his own revenge.

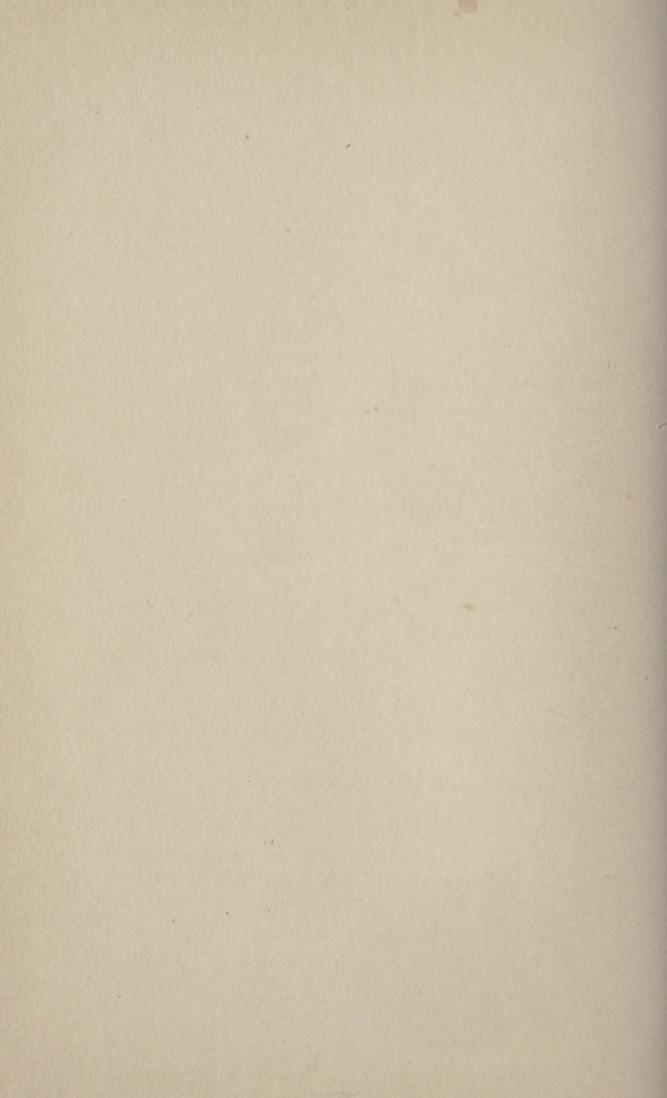
At sundown he was miles from home and found himself on the crest of the hill overlooking the haunted cove. His passion was gone, his better nature controlled, and he stopped for a short rest.

He had sat quietly for a short time when a horseman rode up near him, dismounted, tied his horse and walked stealthily down the hill. He followed the man with his eyes and saw him enter the Murphy spring house. Soon another and another came, until a dozen had passed through the door. They were too far away to be recognized, but he knew what they were. It was a secret meeting of the Bald-knobbers.

Next morning Jean was at the farm helping the men to repair the damages of the flood, and laughing and talking in good spirits.







CHAPTER XVI

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

HRISTMAS in the Ozarks is the leading holiday of the year. There is but one other, July Fourth. The latter is observed by spreadeagle speeches, noise and horse racing. Christmas is the time of good cheer. Everybody is glad; everybody is happy; everybody gives presents, not because it is fashionable, but because from their hearts they desire to please. Nowhere is the Bible precept, "Peace on earth, good will toward men," more closely adhered to than among the pine forests of the Ozark country.

It was now nearing Christmas time. The floods had abated as suddenly as they had risen. Coming as they did in the winter season, the destruction of property was not great. All felt thankful it was

no worse.

The Widow Parnell had a new cabin, better than the old one, within forty-eight hours after her rescue. All the neighbors contributed to its building or its furnishing. Furniture, bedding, provisions and housekeeping utensils were donated until she was better provided than ever before. She felt indeed that Christmas was the happiest season of the year.

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Christmas this year, the year of the big snow, was to be observed in the usual way: by a Christmas

tree in the big log schoolhouse on the hill.

Frank Jackson was the leader in the movement. He called a meeting to arrange for the tree, plans were talked over and committees were appointed. Jim McFadden was to furnish the tree; Mollie Ming, with her assistants, was to decorate it; Sam Miller and others were to furnish the lights; and Martin Rogers was to select assistants to hang on and distribute the presents. All were enthusiastic in their work and the gathering promised to be an enjoyable one.

School was in session, and the teacher and pupils were to furnish a short programme to help provide entertainment for the crowd, before the presents were distributed. The managers of the tree realized that anticipation was often more pleasant than possession, and so placed the distribution of the presents as the last part of the evening's programme.

To add to the gayety of the occasion, Bert Hawley had taken Jean's advice, and he and Cora Bain were to be married at the tree, the first number on the programme. Secretly the boys had planned a rousing charivari for them as soon as they returned home.

Christmas eve arrived cloudy and cold, with a touch of snow in the air. The wind whistled a plaintive note through the naked branches of the oaks and maples in the bottoms and a mournful dirge through the swaying pines as Jean, with his presents for his friends, among them the rug for

Ula, crossed the river and passed over the hill to the schoolhouse. He had started early, but many

were already there when he arrived.

In a corner of the old schoolhouse stood the tree, a great spreading cedar, whose tip touched the rafters of the unceiled room. The tree was decorated with winding streamers of blood-red bittersweet and long festoons of glistening popcorn chains, while over the whole room were wreaths of winter ivy, mosses and mistletoe. The room was lighted by hundreds of tallow candles, made by the decorators themselves, and all over the tree, as if Nature had placed them there, hung golden, russet and red-cheeked apples. Across the tree, in large gilt letters, was the Christmas motto, "Peace on earth, good will toward men."

The beautiful tree, the rustic decorations and the wild surroundings made an impressive picture. Those who had been accustomed to a like sight each year saw its beauty and loved it, but they did not realize what it was they loved. To those who beheld it for the first time it made an impression

never to be forgotten.

The presents as they arrived were distributed over the tree to harmonize with the decorations. On the front of the tree were gaudily dressed dolls for the little girls, toy pistols, bats and balls for the small boys, and bright packages of candy for the babies, with books, toys and trinkets all over the tree for whom they might be, while at the back and in a heap on the floor were the heavier bundles for the older ones.

There was none of the formality of the city tree. No presenting by rule for all of a class or school. Every gift on the tree was a free gift from a friend or lover, and no one would go away empty handed. No one but had some friend to remember them at this glad Christmas time, but many did not and never would know from whom their presents came.

To those who have spent a part of their lives in the country, remote from large towns and cities, Christmas trees stand out as mile posts along the road of time. Christmas in the bald-knob country was indeed the leading event of the year. 'Twas then that enemies forgot their enmity and for the time were friends; separated lovers forgot their quarrels and met on friendly grounds, often to replight their troth. Old friendships were renewed and new friendships made. Christmas times were the beginning of many friendships and courtships that afterward culminated into Christmas weddings. At the Christmas tree the bashful boy forgot his bashfulness and sent to his equally bashful sweetheart some token of his respect and love—a ring, a book or a candy heart, as his taste and his pocketbook might suggest.

Jean waited and watched the laughing crowds gather. He had been kept at home with his grandfather, and had taken no part in preparing the tree, so found his pleasures in watching others enjoy

themselves.

Martin Rogers and Mollie Ming arrived, followed by Ula Dean and Bud Jones. It was the first time Bud had accompanied Ula in public. He had taken

advantage of the Christmas liberties and called to escort her to the tree.

Ula smiled and spoke to Jean as she passed up the aisle. Jean spoke to the party and tried to continue to enjoy the gayety about him as he had before, yet he felt the wild feeling coming over him, his eyes narrowing, his face hardening, but he fought it down. Why should he care? Wasn't Ula happy? And her happiness was what he desired. The feeling of ferocity left him, but all the beauty had gone from the picture which the tree and decorations had made.

Soon Bert Hawley and Cora Bain arrived, accompanied by a crowd of laughing, talking friends. Cora blushed and crept closer to her big, strong lover as he walked up the aisle to where the waiting minister stood.

The minister opened the service with a short prayer for those present, and especially for the two before him who were beginning the pathway of life together, then in a few simple words the ceremony was performed that made Bert and Cora husband and wife.

During the prayer and the wedding ceremony a solemn stillness had spread over the crowded room. But solemnity could not last long with such a merry crowd, and it broke out louder than ever when some mischievous boy pitched twin rag dolls to the top of the tree.

Following the wedding came the entertainment by the school children: songs, dialogues and recitations, with a Christmas carol at the close, all inter-

spersed by hearty hand-clapping and cheers. Then attention was turned to the tree and its contents.

There was a slight hush as Martin and his helpers began handing out the presents, but the noise continued to break out as some ludicrous present was passed back over the crowd to its owner, each one examining it and making some laughable re-

mark as he passed it on.

An old maid received a pair of leather spectacles, and increased the merriment when she threw them at a bunch of boys. Jasper Bass was given an imitation cob pipe made from an elm stick, full four inches in diameter, with a stem four feet long. Jasper was an inveterate smoker, and turned the joke by begging all the tobacco in the crowd to fill his pipe. A bald-headed bachelor, Joe Cameron, received a bottle labeled "Hair Restorer," and on examination found it contained a high grade of perfume. After a great deal of unnecessary effort the twin dolls were secured and started back over the crowd. All were laughing and watching their progress, Bert and his bride with the others, until they saw where they were coming. The merriment reached the climax when the crowd saw their helpless expression as they received the present.

Jean received a small package. He opened it, and found it to be a nicely-bound pocket Bible. On the fly-leaf was written: "To Jean Carroll, from his friend Ula." His face softened as he placed it in his breast pocket. Then there was a nice hand-embroidered handkerchief from Mollie and presents

from his grandfather and other friends.

Bud had received a heavy pair of spurs early in the evening, which he displayed with much pride, and later a nice silk handkerchief, which, as he supposed it came from Ula Dean, pleased him very much.

Ula had received a number of small presents, and the tree had been stripped and nearly all the packages distributed when the bundle containing the rug from Jean was passed over to her. Bud reached out and caught it and exhibited its size to all around.

"What is it?" asked some one.

"We'll see," said Bud, and he began to untie the string.

"Please don't, Mr. Jones," Ula entreated. "Let

me have it."

"Oh, you are afraid to let your friends see what you are getting. Now, don't try to get it. We

must see it, mustn't we, girls?"

All cried "yes," but Ula persisted: "Please, now. I don't wish to have it opened here." But Bud, elated at his honor in escorting the most popular girl in the neighborhood to the tree, thought to show his intimate friendship by displaying her presents to his friends. Failing to untie the knot, he cut the cord with his knife and began to unfold the wrapper. Ula, blushing at his rudeness, sat back and turned her face away.

Jean, sitting alone some distance behind, overheard all that passed. When Bud began to remove the wrappings from the package those near saw Jean start as if to spring upon him, but he caught

himself in time, and looking straight ahead with eyes that saw not, walked from the room and away.

Mollie Ming was delivering a package near the door. She called to him as he passed, then saw his face and shrank back. It was not the face of her friend Jean, but the hard, cold face of a savage. A face from which all expression had departed except ferocity.

Bud unfolded the rug. He knew at once what it was and instinctively glanced to where Jean had sat. He was gone. His chance had come.

would make Ula blush at Jean's present.
"Oh, girls, look here," Bud called; "some bashful swain has made Miss Dean a present of a cat hide," and he held the beautiful skin up to view.

Ula had not looked toward it. Bud caught the skin by the fore legs and displayed it to the laughing, thoughtless throng. The outward fur shone like burnished gold, while in a darker tinge through the centre, reflected from beneath, was the faint outline, "Ula Dean," the whole a piece of exquisite workmanship.

One of Bud's chums, a rough fellow from over on Cowskin, who courted admittance to the group about Bud and Ula, hollowed out: "That's not a cat hide, you fool, that's a painter skin, and a

durned purty one at that."

At the words Ula turned, saw the shiny fur and, with a "How dare you?" snatched the rug from Bud's hands, rose as she quietly folded it in her arms and walked over to where Martin Rogers and Mollie were talking.

"See, Martin," she said, loud enough for all to hear, "what I have for a present. Isn't it beautiful? I value it higher than anything I ever received before."

The last of the presents had been distributed and

the three soon left the room for home.

Bud Jones bit his lip and swore under his breath at the turn things had taken. He had been "mittened" before the whole crowd. The merry throng around him began to quietly slip away. He had lost his popularity with his partner.

When all the young folks had left Bud, the fellow from Cowskin reached over and slapped him on the shoulder, saying: "Cheer up, old boy, it's a

lucky lose; she's worse than a painter herself."

"Oh, damn you, get out," the big fellow growled. Bud and his followers left the room, mounted their horses and took the road for Cowskin. One of them asked: "Ain't we going to the charivari, Bud?" and received for an answer: "Damn the

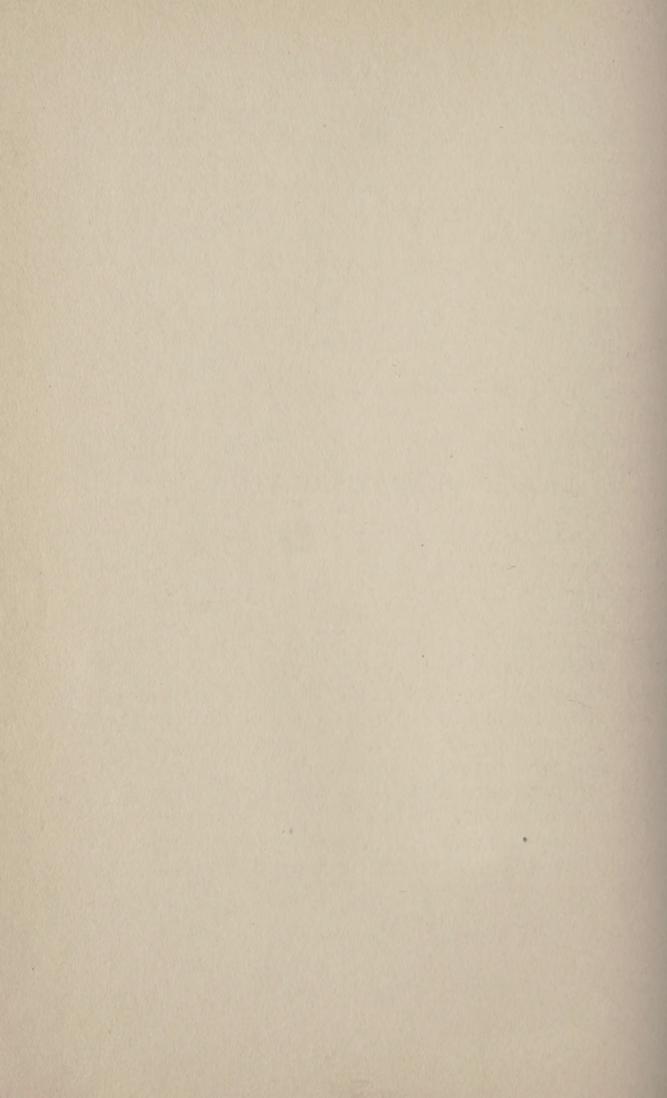
charivari; I'm going home."

Jean went from the schoolhouse to the forest with a bitterness in his soul. Bitterness at himself for not being able to control his temper better; bitterness akin to madness at Bud Jones for causing him such a passion, and a violent hate of almost everything that was good. He wandered on and on. Snow began to fall, first lightly, then faster and faster, until one with less knowledge of the woods and less natural instinct for directions, would have lost their way. Still he wandered on into the snow, the night and the forest, thinking, striving, almost

struggling to keep back the wild thoughts that crowded his brain. He wanted to do right. He wanted to be fair, yet Bud Jones and the Bald-knobbers kept tempting him. If it was only right, if he could only do it and then forget it, how he would like to meet Bud Jones out alone, man to man, and fight him till one died. No, he must not think of such things. He would drive these thoughts from his mind. He tried to think of other things, better things, but could not. The evil would not down.

The wind was driving the chilling snow straight into his heated face, straight upon his unprotected throat. He had not felt it until now, yet the cold water was creeping to the skin. He reached up to button his coat collar about his throat and felt the little Bible on his breast. He stopped, brushed the water from his brow and thought. Thought of the day that would soon dawn and the sacred things it signified, of Ula and of her gift, the book in which is written, "Forgive and ye shall be forgiven." He pressed the book to his heart again. The gloom left his brow; his eyes assumed their brightness. He turned his steps homeward.

JAQUES MURRAY'S DEATH



CHAPTER XVII

JAQUES MURRAY'S DEATH

JAQUES MURRAY'S long life was nearing its close; his hour-glass was almost empty; his sun was setting fast. The once strong body grew weaker day by day, still the mind retained all its activities.

For days Jean had scarcely left his bedside. While awake, he sat ready to supply the aged man's every want. He slept on a cot close at hand, always ready,

always willing.

The winter was passing, yet Jean knew but little of what was going on in the world outside. He thought of his friends, Mollie Ming, Frank Jackson, Sam Miller and others, and he thought of Ula Dean and of Bud Jones, and wondered if Bud still called at the Dean home. He thought as before, but his thoughts were softened. No more did the evil spirit of revenge assail him. Here, in the presence of all-conquering death, his heart was softened. His wild nature was subdued.

He had not heard of Ula's action at the Christmas tree, neither had he heard of the recent acts of the Bald-knobbers throughout the country. Friends who called were not encouraged to talk of

outside matters.

One day in early spring, when the grass was beginning to show green on the hillside and the bluebirds were building their nest in the tall gatepost, when all Nature was waking from its long winter's sleep, Jean was called to the bedside of his aged relative. Jaques Murray's eyes shone brighter and his spirit seemed lighter than for days before. There was a change in his condition. The old man felt it and Jean saw it. Each knew the change for what it was—Jaques Murray's spirit was resting its weary wings for its silent flight to the great beyond.

"Jean, come here, for I will have to tell you goodby this morning. I am not afraid to go. Many things beckon me to the other side, but I am not longing for death; I just meet it as it comes. Meet it just as we must meet all the things of this life that are sent from the Ruler of the Universe. I meet it not desiring, neither flinching nor cringing, but with my face to the front, trying to do my duty

now as I have done it in the past.

"Give me a drink of water, Jean. There, that helps me. Jean, you have been a good boy; more than a son to me, for you have filled the vacant place in my heart for a son and the place of my daughter, your mother. I am not afraid to trust you to work out the problems of life alone, but age should bring wisdom, and I would that you could gain by my experience. A few things I have learned, and they stand out brighter to-day than ever before. One of them, Jean, is this: The pleasures of life are not measured by the successes we have over others,

but by the successes we have over ourselves. 'Know thyself' and 'He that ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city,' are the greatest and wisest

sayings of men.

"There is a great work to do here among these beautiful hills; a work which only unselfish hearts can achieve. A work not to be done for praise or worldly honor, but for love of humanity and because duty calls. You know well what the work is. It is to bring order out of chaos; peace out of the unlawful, degrading condition of this land. I believe you see these conditions in the right spirit. You can help them if you try, but your motive must be pure, for the love of country and fellow man.

"I want you to keep the old farm, Jean. All except the upper pasture. Give this, with the house upon it, to Tom for his faithful service to me. Be kind to the men who have so faithfully helped me on the farm, and give Jim his choice of the young

horses for his willing work.

"Through all my life I have grieved that I did not have a son to carry my name after me, but it was God's will otherwise, and I am glad that you are left to care for the old place—am glad that it will not be divided among strangers, and I hope that before many years have passed you will bring to rule over it a mistress, and that she may bring to you the pleasures I have enjoyed."

"Grandfather," Jean took advantage of a pause to say, "I want to do what you desire. Your requests as to the men will be fully carried out, but I do not wish to deceive you; I may never bring a

mistress to the old home. Grandfather, I don't want to grieve you, but the woman I love, the woman I have always loved, does not love me, and

no other could I bring."

"I am glad you speak your heart, Jean; it shows me you are honest. I did not know you loved, but I do know enough of your nature to know your love will never change. I would feel better satisfied to know that your love was returned, but I am glad you will not go through life without love. Nothing purifies the heart like the burnings of true love. Would you mind telling me who the woman is?"

"No, grandfather. It is Ula Dean."

"She is a good girl, Jean; good and true. Her face tells the story of her life. Her love will be deep. She will love but once. If she does not love you, Jean, we must accept God's will. You will indeed be left alone when I am gone, for you have no relative on your father's side and only one, a cousin, my wife's sister's son, living, on your mother's side, George Grevoise, who, as you know, has not been heard of for many years; in fact, since he was a boy. Do not forget him. He is about your age, if he still lives."

"Grandfather, I will not, and will try to find him.

Are you not tired?"

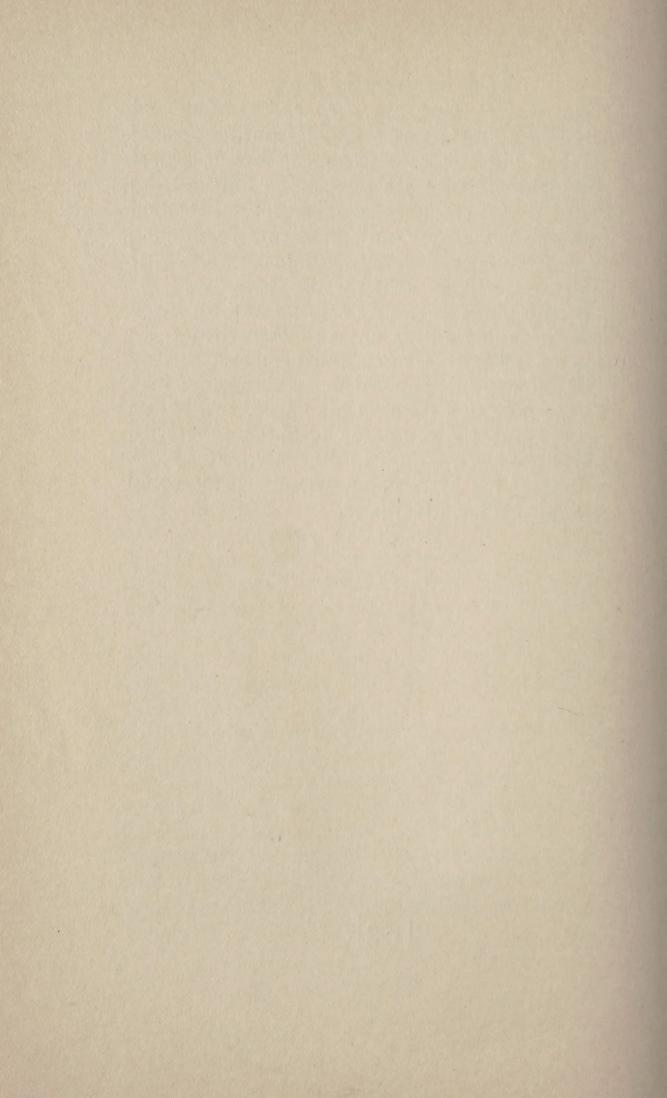
"Yes, Jean, lay me down to sleep. I feel my strength going now. Jean, be a true man, as you have been a true boy. Lay—me—down—to—sleep."

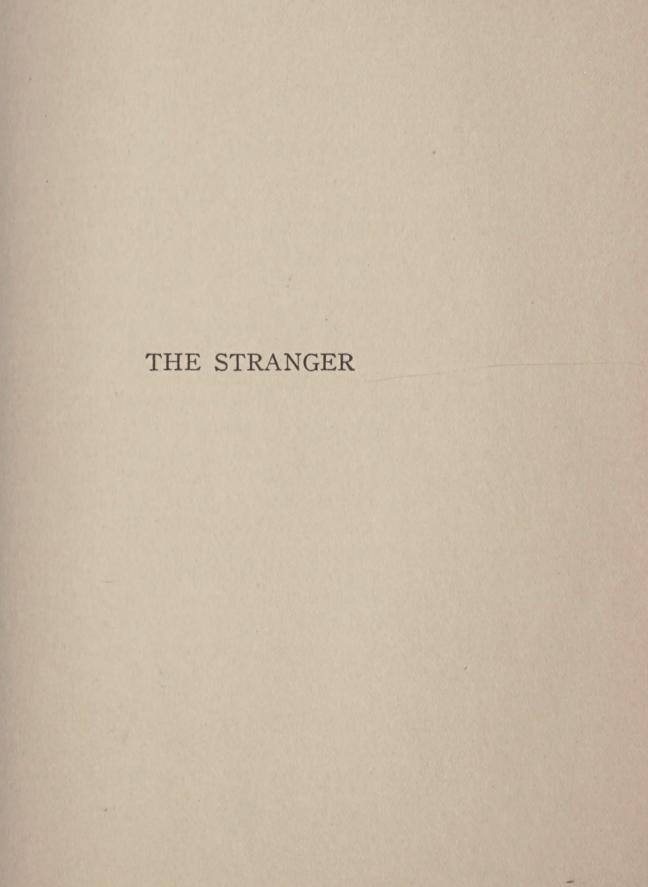
Jean laid the dear old head down upon the pillow and he soon fell asleep, and from the sleep of weariness passed into the sleep that knows no wakening.

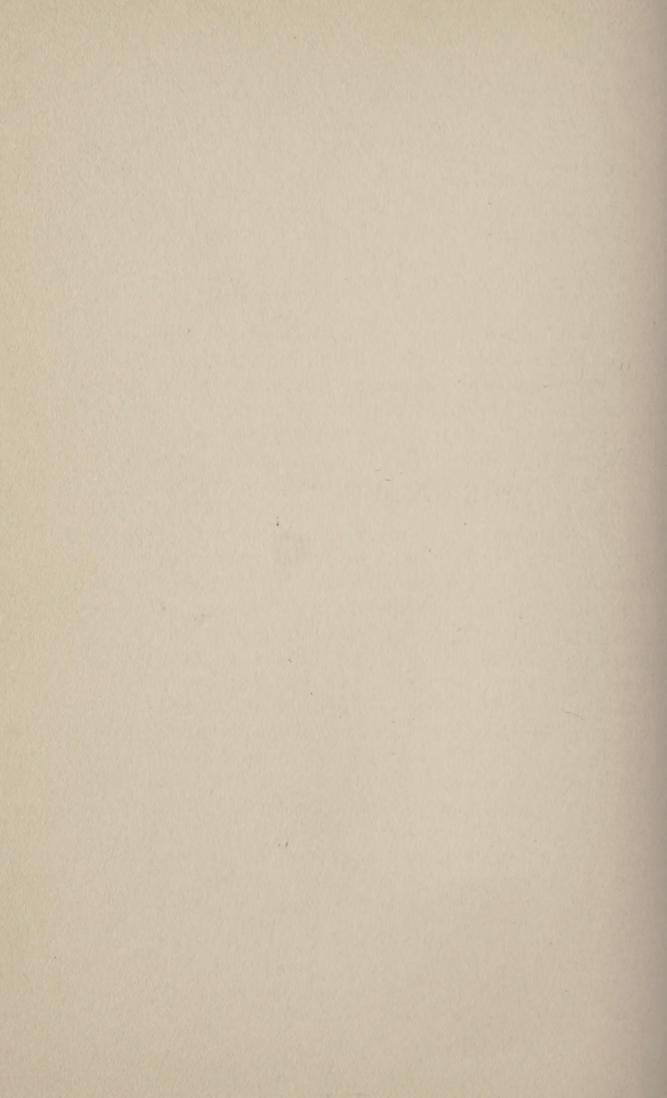
The sun was shining, the flowers blooming and the birds singing as Jean returned from the grave-yard on the hill. All nature wore her brightest hues, yet Jean did not see them. To him, all the world was dark. In all the busy world he stood alone; no one to care for, no one to care for him.

He carefully complied with the last requests of the dying man. Tom wept for the memory of the kind old man when he found that he and his loved ones were provided with a home of their own.

When all the business was finished, Jean turned for consolation to his beloved woods, a young man with no kindred ties, with all his life's work before him. At night he returned, brighter in spirits. There was a work for him to do. A greater work than working for kindred or friends. He would work to aid this beautiful land.







CHAPTER XVIII

THE STRANGER

I N an Eastern city, in a well-appointed office in one of the skyscraper office buildings, a board of directors was discussing the interests of

their company. The chairman was speaking:

"Gentlemen: As you see, our engineers report that our present lead of jack will last only two more years. After those years, unless we make further explorations, our valuable property will cease to exist and all the expensive machinery in our reducing plant will be worth only its weight as junk. Our property has been a very valuable one. It has netted our shareholders large dividends, and the surplus now on hand is a snug fortune within itself. property is still valuable, for we have two more years of profits now in sight, and why not try to keep this property valuable. There are two fields to explore. One is to seek a lower vein in the present mine; the other is to send some skilled man to find and secure some new location. I favor both steps at once. I want to hear from other members of the board."

A short, stolid man, conservatism written all over his face, took the floor. "Gentlemen," said he, "I shall not oppose any measure that points toward a

widening of our company's possibilities, yet I favor first a thorough prospecting of the land we now own, and if this fails us then look elsewhere."

"Mr. Chairman," said another, "I favor investigating both propositions at once. If we take up one work and fail in that our plant will have to shut down until the other field is tried. This will be an enormous expense as compared with the investigating work, so I favor the outside work as well as the investigation of our own property. I know just such a man as we need for this outside work. This man has made an extensive study of the mineral fields of Southwest Missouri. Mr. Chairman, I move that we call in Mr. Grevoise and get his ideas on the matter."

The motion was put and carried.

The speaker reached for a telephone and called for George Grevoise.

"Hello! is this Mr. Grevoise?"

"This is the Consolidated Zinc and Lead Mining Company. Can you come to our office at once and meet the board of directors?"

"We will be waiting for you. Good-by."

George Grevoise entered the directors' room a few moments later. He was a young man, not over twenty-five, dark haired, dark skinned and black eyed, quick and intelligent.

"Gentlemen, at your service," he said, after speaking to a number of those present whom he

knew.

The chairman explained to him why he had been called by the board.

"Are you," said the president, "in a position to look into this matter for the company in the near future?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose I am. As you are probably aware, I have made a study of the zinc fields of Southern Missouri for several years. All indications point to rich deposits to the southeast of the present developments. It has been my intention to spend the early part of the summer in that section, taking a needed rest from my office work, and to study the field at close range. Should you so desire, I will make the examination for your company and report only to it."

"That is just what we want," chorused a number

of voices.

"Can you name a price now for your services that we may take official action on the matter?" asked the chairman.

Grevoise studied a moment and named a sum.

One of the members arose from his seat, and said: "Mr. Chairman, I move we employ Mr. Grevoise for this special work."

The motion was put and carried.

"When will you be ready to start?" asked the chairman.

"I will be ready to depart the day after to-morrow, and, gentlemen, will you allow me to suggest that my destination and work be kept entirely secret, as the knowledge that a large company like yours was investigating a field would cause others to rush in and hamper our work. It is best that my friends here understand that I am on a vacation,

and that the people where I go do not suspect my purpose. For that reason I will not write back until my work is finished. The people of that country are quick to arrive at conclusions. A letter addressed to the company and mailed at one of those little country post offices would connect me with your company at once. And it will be better that you do not write me, as my name might lead to their detecting my business. I will simply go into the country as a stranger, and so remain until my work is finished."

"We will accept your suggestions and await your return for news. I hope it will be good," the chair-

man replied.

"I hope so, too, and believe it will. I have great faith in the field. Good-by, gentlemen, until I have explored the Ozarks," and George Grevoise bowed himself out of the room.

Jean Carroll was turning the cattle from the lower pasture onto the ranges one morning in early spring when he saw, sitting on the fence near the gateway a tall, dark-complexioned, well-dressed young man.

"Good morning," said the stranger. "This is

Mr. Jean Carroll, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, that is my name," Jean replied.

"Mr. Carroll, I am a stranger in this country, and wish to spend a few weeks hunting over your beautiful hills. I wish to get a place to stay where I can come and go at my pleasure, without troubling any

one. Could I persuade you to receive me into your home on these conditions?"

"Yes, sir; you can arrange to stay with me, but you will not find it much of a home, as I live alone. The house is cared for by the hired man and his wife, who live on the other side of the farm. If you can accept these conditions, you are welcome to stay."

"Such a place is just what I want. I can come and go without bothering any one except yourself, and I will try not to interfere with your plans more than I can help. If you will name the price of a month's board, I will pay you now and call this my

home while here."

"We will not quarrel about the charges for board. All you will be allowed to pay is something to the housekeeper for her work. Leave that until you see that our place suits you. If you will walk with me to the top of the hill, to start the cattle to the ranges, we will then go back to the house, where you can see your room and get dinner."

Jean took up the small valise which the stranger had carried, and led the way, the stranger follow-

ing, with a light shotgun over his shoulder.

At the top of the hill they turned to look back across the valley. At their feet lay the Murray farm, the big square dwelling nestled among a cluster of evergreens and blooming fruit trees, the farm land, the meadows showing green under the morning sun, stretched away to the river.

"This is where I live," said Jean, pointing to the dwelling below. "That road winding up the hill to

the north is the 'big road,' the road to Springfield. That knob, where it hugs the foot, is 'Bald Jess.' Those two knobs away back here to the south are the 'Twin Brothers.' That peak, across the river, almost lost in the azure blue, is 'Lone Tree Mountain.' It is thirty miles away, yet, when the sun is right, you can see the lone tree on its summit. The tall knob to the east is 'Granny Moon's knob,' and 'Granny Moon's cove' lies at its foot. The great pine forest around it is the Irish Wilderness. It stretches on a hundred miles or more to the east."

"Mr. Carroll, this is a beautiful country," said the stranger. "Life here should be all pleasures."

"It's good to live here," said Jean; "but life is what we make it. Its pleasures come more from within than without."

The stranger looked at Jean as if surprised at such sentiments from a dweller of the hills.

"We had better go to dinner," said Jean.

After dinner the stranger was shown his room and told to make himself entirely at home, and to come and go as it suited him.

"I will take you at your word, Mr. Carroll," the stranger said, "and, if I wander out too far, I may spend the night on the mountain side. Outdoor life is what I am looking for, so do not feel uneasy if I do not appear when expected."

It was the busy season of the year, and Jean was kept close at home, looking after the farm work and the cattle. The stranger, as he was called, came and went as he pleased, yet often of an evening both were at home together. They spent this time sitting

on the wide porch, or lying upon the grass, discussing items of general interest from the outside world. These chats did Jean much good, driving his thoughts away from his own affairs and away from

brooding over the acts of the Bald-knobbers.

All subjects, except neighborhood gossip and personal matters, came up for discussion, the stranger proving an interesting talker and a good companion. They talked of State affairs, National affairs, philosophy, science and inventions, yet neither referred to the past of the other. The stranger wished to avoid disclosing his identity; Jean was always reticent in speaking of affairs of his own; so there were no confidences between them, but each day they were more and more like friends.

One evening, as they lay on the cool grass, in the bright moonshine, the stranger turned to Jean and said: "Mr. Carroll, this is a wonderful country of vast possibilities. At the foot of this cove wastes enough power to turn ten thousand spindles. On every mountain side is a princely fortune in timber. These hills and valleys are cut and carved into the most beautiful and fantastic forms. Each nook or cove would make a beautiful home or health resort. The country offers nearly all the attractions to the summer roomer that can be found anywhere. Its rivers furnish ideal boating and bathing, its springs healing waters, its forests delightful walks and drives, and its mountains beautiful scenery."

"Stranger," Jean slowly replied, "this is a fair land—all that you picture it—but there are things better for a country than whirling spindles or lum-

ber fortunes or summer homes. It is a peaceable, contented people. I value one good citizen far more than all the restless roamers that might come. Don't go away to your city home and tell the hurrying hordes of our attractions, our springs, rivers, hills and caverns. We like an occasional visitor, who can give us a glimpse of the outside world, and who can appreciate our country and our simple, honest people; but we do not want our grand old hills turned into country resorts, or our waterfalls into cotton mills."

"You are right about the real wealth of a country," said the stranger, raising himself on one elbow. "It is not the number of people, but their contentment, that marks the real wealth. But you speak of caverns, and I have not found any here."

"They are here—some that have never been explored. I found one last fall, on Granny Moon's knob, that has never been explored, so far as any

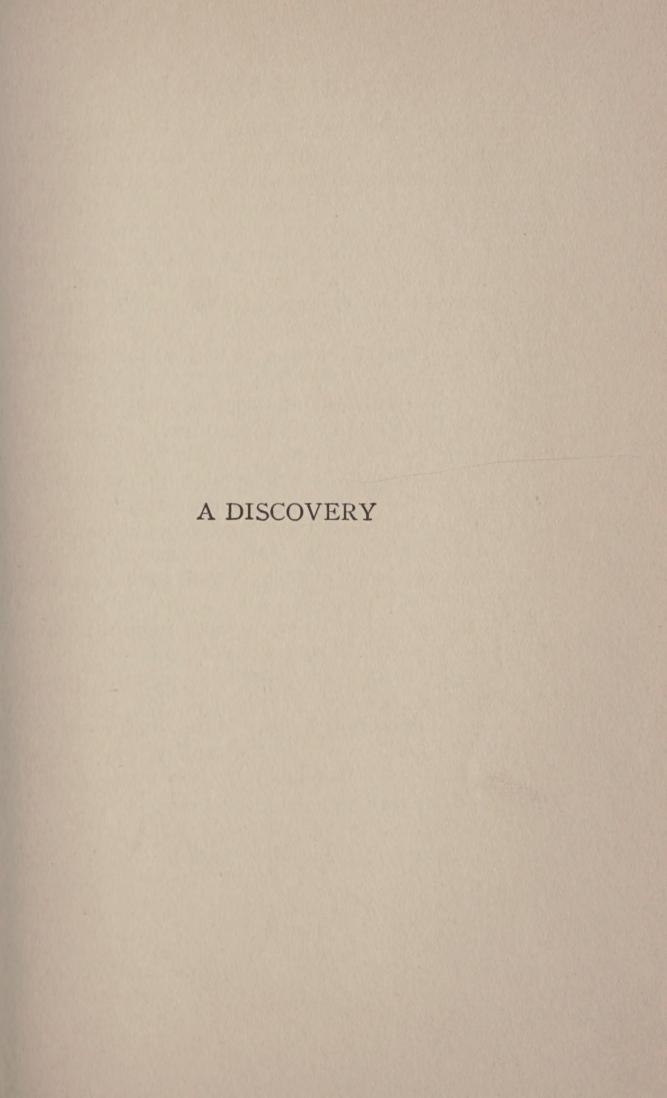
one about here knows."

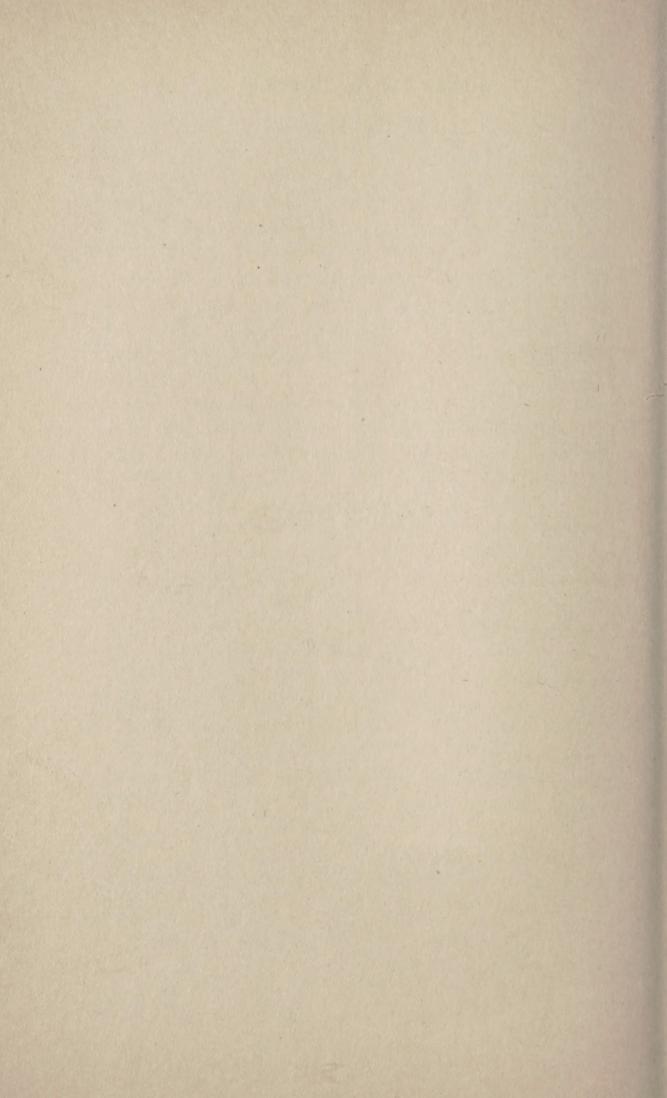
"Oh, I should like to explore an unknown cavern. I have never had that pleasure."

"We call this cave the 'panther cave,' and, if you

wish, we will explore it together."

"I would certainly enjoy it. When shall we go?"
"We will go as soon as the rush of harvest is over. I feel that a day in the woods would do me good."





CHAPTER XIX

A DISCOVERY

THE harvest was over. The wheat fields and meadows had been shorn of their abundant crops. The corn in the valley was sending forth its golden pendants, changing its color to a mellow green, and the glad new life of spring was being blended into the shades of summer.

Jean and the stranger were on their way to the store, and from there were going to the Panther cave. They felt the thrill of the early morning and talked and laughed merrily, as their horses' hoofs

clattered over the stony road.

"Hello, judge!" called Jean, addressing the proprietor, as they rode up to the front of the little boxed building that served the double purpose of store and post office. "Is there any mail for me?"

"No, I believe not, Jean. Say, have you seen the

Springfield papers?"

"No, judge, what's the news?"

"Why, they say the town's flooded with counterfeit silver. Some of it was even passed onto the postmaster! What will they do next, do you reckon?"

"I don't know. They must be bad when they'll [213]

pass counterfeit on the government itself. What

else did they say?"

"They say that indications point toward the Ozark country as the place where the bad money comes from. I'd like to see them pass the stuff on me."

"Well, I hope it will be found that it didn't come from down in here. We need money, but not that kind." Turning to the stranger Jean said: "Are you ready to go?"
"Yes," the stranger replied. "Whenever you

are," and the two turned and left the store.

"Keep your eyes peeled for the stuff, Jean," called the judge. "I'm the government's agent here and would report my own boy if I caught him violating the law."

"All right, judge, I'll do it," replied Jean, as the two men mounted their horses and rode off toward the Irish wilderness and the Panther cave. They reached the cave before noon, and tying their horses in a sheltered valley prepared for the exploration.

The stranger carried a lantern and Jean collected some rich pine knots to use should he wish to explore alone. They crawled through the opening to where the panther had been killed; here they found two leads from the room. They tried one of them, but soon reached the end of it and returned to the large room.

"Our work will soon be over if this lead reaches no farther than the other," remarked the stranger.

"It will hardly be worth our trip up here."

"One can never tell about these caves," Jean re-

plied. "They may extend a mile, or they may play out in a few yards; all we can do is to try and see."

They entered the second lead. It became smaller and smaller, until they had to crawl, but extended directly into the hill. They moved slowly on and on, for what seemed a long distance to the crawling men, and came suddenly into a large room. Some time was spent in exploring this place and examining the walls and roof by the stranger. In some places the walls were an ashen hue, the location of these being carefully noted by him. Specimens were collected from all parts of the room.

There were many beautiful formations in this part of the cave, and a stream of water came from the north and, flowing through the room, passed

out through an opening toward the south.

At last they sat down on a shelving rock to rest, and Jean looked at his watch. "Why, it is after six o'clock," he exclaimed. "We must be moving along if we expect to get home to-night. Has the cave proven worth the trip?"

"Oh, certainly; and this is so beautiful and interesting that I had forgotten the flight of time. Let's follow for a ways the openings leading from

here and then quit for to-day."

"I'll light my torch, then, and we'll each take an opening," said Jean. "You take the openings on the right and I'll take the ones on the left, each to return here every half hour."

They parted and both returned before the half hour was gone. They again each entered a differ-

ent lead and soon returned.

"There seems to be very little more to our cavern," said Jean. "All these openings soon end."

"There's two more to try," said the stranger.
"I'll take the branch where the stream leads out and you take the other. This stream ought to go somewhere."

Jean entered the last of his openings. It proved to be nothing more than a deep fissure extending several yards into the wall and he soon had thoroughly explored it and was back in the main cave. He sat down by the entrance to the stranger's lead and awaited his return. The half hour passed and the stranger did not appear. Jean walked into the

opening a short way but could hear nothing.

He waited a few minutes longer, but the stranger did not come, and he then decided he would go in search of him. Leaving his hat in the opening, so that if the stranger should return he would know that Jean had been there, he entered the channel and followed it a ways, then stopped and listened. He heard nothing. He went farther, stopped again and called. The sound echoed and reëchoed through the winding tunnel. When the sound had died away there came from far down the channel the muffled ring of a gun shot.

"He is hurt and is shooting to call me," thought Jean, and carefully rearranging his torch he set off at a run down the rough floor. Soon a gleam of light appeared round a bend in the passage and then the flash of the lantern as the stranger, hatless, and with a stream of blood coursing down his tem-

ple, came running toward him.

"Hello! what's the matter?" Jean asked. "I

thought I heard you shoot."

"Come on; I'll explain when we get outside," the stranger replied breathlessly. "We had better get out as quickly and as quietly as we can." Jean stepped to the rear, dipped his torch in the stream and followed on in the footsteps of the excited man.

They traveled the whole length of the cave without speaking, the stranger hurrying forward as fast as the nature of the floor would permit. Jean followed step by step, eyes and ears alert for he knew not what. Of one thing he felt sure, the stranger would not act this way without a cause. Then he remembered that they were near the Haunted cove, and remembered also what he had seen at the spring house. They did well to hurry out.

Before they reached the entrance, Jean took the lantern and turned it out, then crawled carefully into the open air. There was no moon, but compared with the blackness of the cave, the night appeared bright, and they soon found their horses and

were away.

The stranger started for home, but Jean, with his instinct for hiding his trail, struck in the opposite direction. The stranger, noting this, turned and fell in behind and followed Jean's lead. They galloped for miles straight ahead. At last Jean allowed the stranger to reach his side. "I'll stop here," he said. "You go on until you come to a small prairie valley. Stop in the edge of it, and wait for me, unless you hear gun shots. If you hear me shoot, push on, strike the river and cross

it enough to hide your trail before turning home-ward."

Jean handed his reins to the other rider, and, without checking the horses, swung to the ground, gun in hand. The horses clattered on down the rocky slope. For several minutes he could hear the rattle of their hoofs, then they struck the valley and the hoof beats ceased, except for an occasional sound. He waited and they ceased altogether; the stranger had reached the prairie valley and was

resting.

Jean turned his ear to listen for other hoof beats. He heard a lone wolf howl away beyond the Twin Brother Mountains; a laughing owl in the bottom ha-haed its weird call; and, far away in the wilderness, a panther gave its blood-curdling scream as it called to its mate—all sounds of the night. Jean pressed his ear to the ground and listened. There was no other sound; there were no followers on the trail. He arose and quietly took his way down the mountain.

The stranger had tethered the horses in a sheltered place and slipped back up the mountain to watch. He was no woodsman, but understood from Jean's actions that they were to avoid discovery. He met Jean at the foot of the hill.

"Hello!" said Jean, "where are the horses?"

"I left them over in the woods. Why did you

stop so far behind and then walk?"

"I wanted to see if we were followed, but no one has yet started on our trail, so now you will have time to tell me what happened in the cave,

though I almost know beforehand. That's a bullet

mark on your head. Are you much hurt?"

"No; it is only a scratch. Mr. Carroll, I almost hate to tell you what I saw in the cave, for fear you cannot believe it. If it were not for the bullet mark I would almost doubt it myself. Already it all seems like a vision. When we separated in the big cavern the last time I followed the stream of water for some distance. I had found some very interesting formations when suddenly, on rounding a corner, I saw the gleam of a light in the water ahead. At first I thought it might be a reflection from my own lantern, and, to test this, I turned my light down and set it in a side niche. The gleam showed plainer than ever. It flashed into my mind that it was light from outside, but that theory was broken down by the thought that it was dark outside. I left my lantern where it was and crept forward to investigate. I passed a turn in the way and saw that the light came through a crevice at the end of the passage. The walls were getting closer and closer together, and to reach the crevice I had to turn sideways. I finally reached a point where I could see where the light came from, and the sight almost paralyzed me.

"A big cave was before me, and around a candle near the centre a group of men were seated in a circle, busily discussing something. All of them, except one, wore black masks. The unmasked man was a tall, ungainly fellow. He did not sit with the group, but stood outside the circle. Near the centre of the group was a box, filled to the top

with shining silver pieces, with rolls of greenbacks around it.

"As I said before, I was almost paralyzed with astonishment and surprise. It seemed like a picture from the stories of Robin Hood's time. I stood there awhile motionless, trying to catch the trend of their words, and had caught a word here and there, among them your name, when you called. They all heard the sound and turned toward the crevice. A large man with a big black hat said: 'Hell! what's that?' The unmasked man said: 'It's a panther; there it is in that crevice.'

"I was all the time trying to get back from the light, and had made some slight noise. When the fellow said, 'There it is,' the big man jerked out his pistol and fired. I had not yet turned my head and received this shave from the bullet. I got out of the crevice, crawled back to my lantern, and then ran till I met you. Can you explain what it all means?"

"Yes; it's all clear to me now. The cave reaches clear through the mountain. We had gone farther than we thought, and you were nearly out on the other side. That end of the cave is a retreat for some outlaws. You caught them dividing the spoils of some successful raid. It is well they thought you a panther, and not a man, or you would never have escaped. I fear yet they will find their mistake and try to trail us home."

"I knew we should hurry away, but I didn't think about trying to hide the way we went. Could they

track the horses across such a stony, rough mountain?"

"Yes; they could track us in a lope. A good woodsman can trail a deer, as light footed as they

are, over any of this country."

They had reached their horses and both mounted, when Jean said: "We must lose our trail if we can. They are almost sure to look for the panther and thus find it was a man. We must either wait and fight it out or throw them off our trail. We'll try to throw them off."

"Will they follow us this far?"

"Yes. If they strike our trail they will follow it until they find us or lose the trail. Their power in this country depends on their keeping everybody afraid of them, and they will try not to let a spy go unpunished."

"We must not let them find us, Mr. Carroll. I do not wish to get into trouble in a strange coun-

try among strangers."

"We must get away from here, then, and never speak of where we have been. I hope the postmaster did not notice the direction we took."

"Oh, I know now; that is the place where the

counterfeit money is made."

"It will be safer to forget that until you are well out of the Ozarks. These men are desperate men, and will stoop to any crime to shield themselves. To let it be known where we have been to-night will mean our lives."

"This is a beautiful land," said the stranger, "but

every rose has its thorns."

"Yes; but the thorn here is weakening, and before many years have passed I hope to see it gone. Then, and not till then, will our fair land come into

its heritage—a land of peaceful homes."

They were riding down the valley, came to the river and crossed it, rode on until they struck the public road, turned to the east and crossed the river again, following the road until they reached a rocky hill, turned to the right and rode through the woods to the south until the river was again reached. Here Jean lead the way into the river, followed the stream to a riffle, and came out on the west side. From there they rode straight through the woods to the schoolhouse, where many roads met. From the schoolhouse they rode to the store and then turned toward home.

No words were spoken; the stranger wondering why such precaution was necessary. Jean, his face darkening, seeking the best plans to confuse Bud Jones as to who were the cave's visitors. At the creek they turned through the woods and let the horses into the lower pasture by a gap in the rail fence, and walked up through the meadow and orchard to the house.

When they reached the porch the stranger bade Jean good night and went to his room. Jean went to the barn to feed the horses and prepare for the day's work. Day was just breaking.

Jean spent the day mowing weeds in the bottom by the lower pasture. He took his big Winchester with him to the field. His work gave him a view of

the road to the store.

The stranger slept until afternoon, and it was mid-afternoon when he joined Jean in the field. "Mr. Carroll," he began when he had seated himself near by, "I wish to have a talk with you. My stay here for the present is about over. I would have gone away soon, anyway, and since the adventure of last night I think I had better go at once, as it will be impossible to keep the scratch on my head concealed, and, if seen, it will give me away.

"I feel it my duty to you, in consideration of your great kindness to me, to tell you something of my business here. My duty to those who sent me does not allow me to say much, yet I will say this: While my stay has been a great pleasure, I have had a business mission as well, and now that

mission is fulfilled."

"My friend," Jean interrupted him, "for I hope you so consider yourself, you do not owe me any confidence that your best interests do not say you shall divulge. Although a stranger, you have shown yourself a man, and I ask no more. As for your calling, I need no telling as to that. Many would consider you a government spy, but I know you different. You are a prospector, but you need not fear I will use the knowledge that I could not help but gain."

"You have guessed aright, and I thank you for keeping what you have known. How did you dis-

cover my business here?"

"Easily enough—your acts betrayed you. You studied the earth and not the sky, the stones and

not the flowers. Your very caution told your mission."

"Well, my secret was not so much a secret as I thought, and I hope that when I come back, as I expect to do, I will be free to tell you who I am and all about what we expect to do. I must leave tomorrow morning for my home, but before I go, I wish to assure you that I appreciate the great kindness you have shown to me, a total stranger."

"No man is a stranger who comes as a friend

and conducts himself as such."

"Well, Mr. Carroll, I must say good-by, for I will have to leave early to-morrow to catch the Springfield stage. I will write you when I get home and get the permission of my employers to do so."

"It will not be safe for you to go by the stage, the men you saw last night might be watching. The best plan will be for you to be ready after dark, and I will take you on horseback. I look for trouble, but I know how to meet these men—you do not. It will be best for you to go to the house and keep close till I come. Then we will steal away."

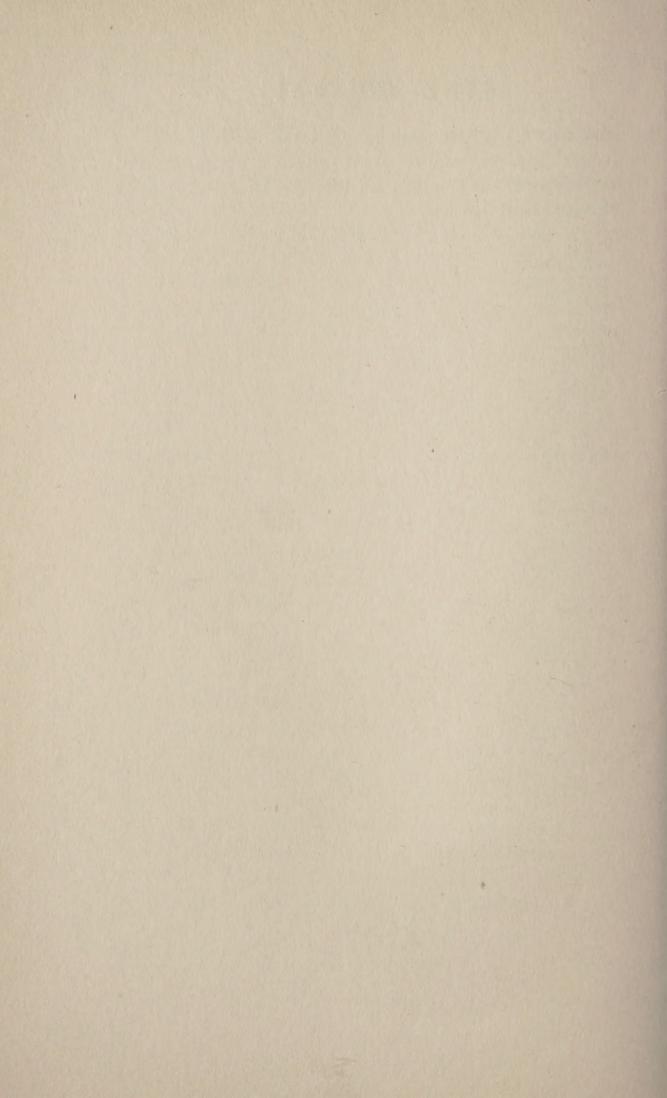
"Your offer is very kind, and I accept it. I will

be ready when you come."

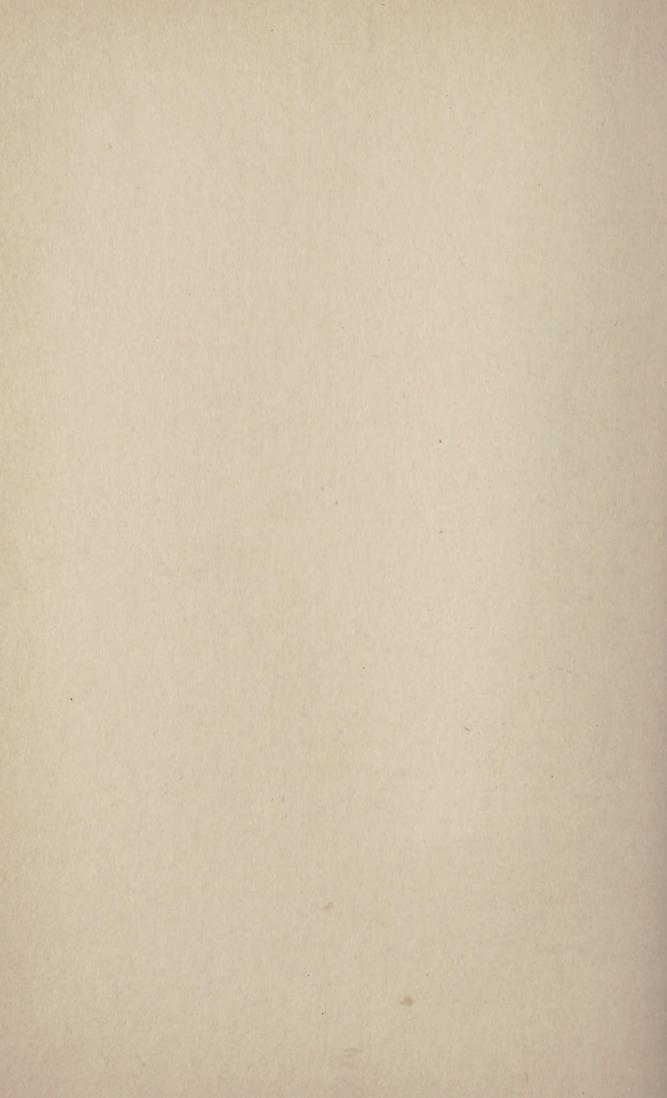
The stranger went back to the big house by the spring to prepare for his long journey. Jean kept to his work near the road that led down the hill from toward the store.

About sundown, while Jean was in the shadow of the timber, near the fence, a lone horseman rode down the hill from the store, crossed the stream at the ford, then left the road and followed the trail

to the lower pasture fence and examined it closely. It was the place where Jean and the stranger had let their horses into the pasture that morning. The rider was Bud Jones.



AT THE FORD



CHAPTER XX

AT THE FORD

TLA DEAN went home from the Christmas tree overcome with anger. She was angry at Bud Jones for his insolence, angry at herself for going with him, and doubly angry for allowing him to display Jean's present to the giddy crowd.

On reaching home she hardly paused to bid Martin and Mollie good night, but hurried to her room. She locked the door and quickly unfolded the rug; the other presents were tossed aside unnoticed. She carefully spread the rug upon the bed and viewed its beautiful shades. In the lamplight her name shone through the outer fur like a cloud shadow on a field of ripening grain. Then for the first time she realized the exquisite beauty of the rug and the hours of painstaking work it had cost. She burst into tears and, throwing herself upon the bed, buried her face in its shining coat.

"Oh, what have I done?" she moaned. "What have I done? After the hours and days of labor he has spent to please me, to think I could go with a man that would slur him and laugh at his work. Oh, Jean, if you only knew, you would not blame me. I only accepted his company to keep from be-

ing rude. I wanted to be with you, for I love you—love you—love you—and now you are mad at me." And there, with her face still resting on the rug, she cried herself to sleep, and dreamed of the meeting in the pine woods, where she heard the music of the pines, and they sang to her the sweet song of love.

On Christmas day Mollie, with her parents, took dinner at the Dean home. After the dinner was over, the two girls slipped away to Ula's room to exhibit to each other their Christmas presents, and to tell to each other the heart secrets that only girls can know.

"Here is my best present, Mollie," and Ula, blushing, brought from her trunk the panther-skin

rug and displayed it to Mollie's admiring eyes.

"Oh, how beautiful!" cried Mollie. "What a fine piece of work it is. I never before saw anything like it. It's a present from Jean, too; and so appropriate, as you killed the animal while it was fighting him. It has taken lots of work to finish this. Isn't he good! The best fellow in the world, except one," and she threw her arms around her friend and kissed her. Then she pushed her away at arms' length and held her, saying:

"Why, Ula Dean, you're crying. What's the

matter?"

Ula, with her face hidden on Mollie's shoulder, told the story of Bud's act, and of Jean leaving the schoolhouse the evening before.

"Oh, you mustn't cry about that," Mollie comforted her; "Jean wasn't mad. He only had one of

his 'Indian spells,' as we used to call them at school. He'll be all right when we see him again. I'll tell him how sorry you are."

"No, no! Mollie, you mustn't tell him. I couldn't

stand that. Please now, you won't, will you?"

"No, of course not, if you don't want me to."

"Well, I don't want you to. He ought to know, without being told, that I hate Bud Jones for what he did. I hear Martin calling us to take a walk to

the spring. Shall we go?"

"Oh, yes, let's go," and Mollie ran off, leaving Ula to put away the presents and follow her. It was their last talk for the day, and weeks passed, weeks of bad stormy weather, before they talked

again.

As she rode home with her parents that afternoon Mollie planned how she would let Jean know something of Ula's state of mind, even if she had been forbidden to tell. She could hint at least. But she was doomed to be disappointed; Jean's grandfather was worse and he could not leave home, and when she did see him once at church he only spoke and passed on. He spoke pleasantly, but there was a sadness in his face and a far-away look in his eyes that showed he was not like his old self.

Jean met Ula Dean in the same way—always kind and courteous, but as if something was lacking, and each time she was glad to get home where she

could cry herself to sleep.

Her face was losing some of its color, and her step its buoyant spring. Her parents feared she was sick. They talked of a visit back east for Ula's

health, but she begged them not to take her away,

and the trip was postponed.

When the warm spring days came it was planned that the Sunday-school should spend a day in the woods. Early in the morning the children, under the care of their teachers, gathered at the old school-house, where they mounted heavy hay wagons and rode to the banks of Swan Creek, where the dinner was to be spread.

Many of the older people of the neighborhood were present, among them Bud Jones and some of

his followers.

Bud pretended to take a great interest in the children; made for them a swing from a grapevine and carried stones to build them a passway across the stream. When dinner was over he endeavored to speak to Mollie Ming, but finding that Martin Rogers occupied all her time, he turned his attention to Ula Dean.

She only answered him when politeness compelled her to do so, and to escape him called her class together and went in search of flowers for a wreath.

Bud followed her, and gathering some flowers himself, said: "You have a fine class, Miss Dean."

"Yes, sir; they are all good boys and girls."

"They could not be otherwise with such a teacher. Will you allow me to join your class for to-day?"

"Please excuse me, Mr. Jones; I do not wish for any additions," and she hurried away to assist some of the little girls that were calling her.

Bud's companions, who were eager to catch every

word he said, overheard the whole conversation. They were laughing boisterously when Bud joined them.

"She scratched you again, didn't she?" said the boy from Cowskin. "Didn't I tell you she was a

painter?"

"Somebody's been telling her lies about me," said Bud; "and I know who it is. It's that d-d Indian, Jean Carroll. I'll get even with him yet."

Ula continued listless and her father wrote to their old family physician regarding her condition. The doctor advised horseback riding, and to this Ula gladly agreed, and by early spring had taken to riding every day. The exercise was doing her great good. She was improving in spirits as well as bodily health. The daily contact with Nature, as she rode across hill and woodland, could not fail to revive her spirits.

She rode to the store for the mail, to the neighbors when there were errands of any kind, and even to the ranges after the cattle, although these trips were never made without her father's company.

It was midsummer, on a bright afternoon, when she rode over for a short visit with Mollie Ming. The two friends had much to tell each other and time passed swiftly for them. It was getting late. when Ula glanced at her watch.

"Oh, I didn't know it was so late!" she ex-

claimed. "I must be going."

"Wait just a minute, Ula, I wish to tell you something. You know that Bud Jones used to come to

see me before Martin and I were acquainted. I never did want to see him, but treated him nicely on father's account. Well, he's been coming again lately, pretending to wish to see father. I show him that I do not want him to come, but he doesn't quit. I don't know what to do. I am afraid Martin will blame me for what I can't help."

"Have you told him about it?"

"Yes; and he said he could trust me; but he might get to thinking that I encouraged Bud after awhile."

"You needn't be afraid, Mollie. I'll use your words in speaking of him: 'he's the best man in the

world, but one,' if he is my cousin."

"What must I do, Ula? Father has business with Bud and I can't refuse to speak to him. I wish I could see Jean. He'd tell me what to do."

"When did you see Jean last. I never see him

any more. I know he's mad at me."

"He must be mad at me, too, for I never see him, except once in a while when he comes to see father on business. But he's not mad, Ula; he's only bothered about something. He won't get mad without a cause, and we've given him no cause."

"Mollie, it's late, and I must go now. It'll be dark before I get home, for I'm going the river road. I like it when I feel 'blue.' It's so gloomy

and lonesome that it suits my spirits."

"You must be like Jean in that, he says the trees always talk to him to suit his temper. You'll pass by his field. I hope you'll see him."

"I want to see him, but I don't want to go to see him. Well, good-by, Mollie, I'm off. Come over."

"I will. Good-by."

"Poor Ula," Mollie murmured to herself, as she walked toward the house, "Jean doesn't know what a true heart she is keeping for him, or he'd fly to her, and it won't do for any one to tell him, for he must find it out for himself. He'll do it some day,

for they were made for each other."

Ula rode down through the pine forest to the valley, and then slowly through its darkening shadows toward the Murray farm. She was nearing the ford, where the trail she was traveling joined the road that came from the store, when she heard hoof beats coming down the store road. She paused to listen and, finding that the rider would soon be at the creek, pulled her horse aside into the shadow of a vine-clad tree and waited for him to pass.

The rider soon came into view. It was Bud Jones, and he was riding very slowly, with his eyes fastened on the ground. He crossed the creek, rode on a few steps, then stopped his horse and looked closely at the ground at the side of the road. He then turned and rode out to the Murray pasture fence. He paused at the fence a few moments, examined it carefully, and, turning, rode rapidly up

the road toward the Murray home.

Ula rode slowly along the sandy way to the ford, wondering what Bud Jones could be doing at the Murray farm. Her horse stopped at the creek to

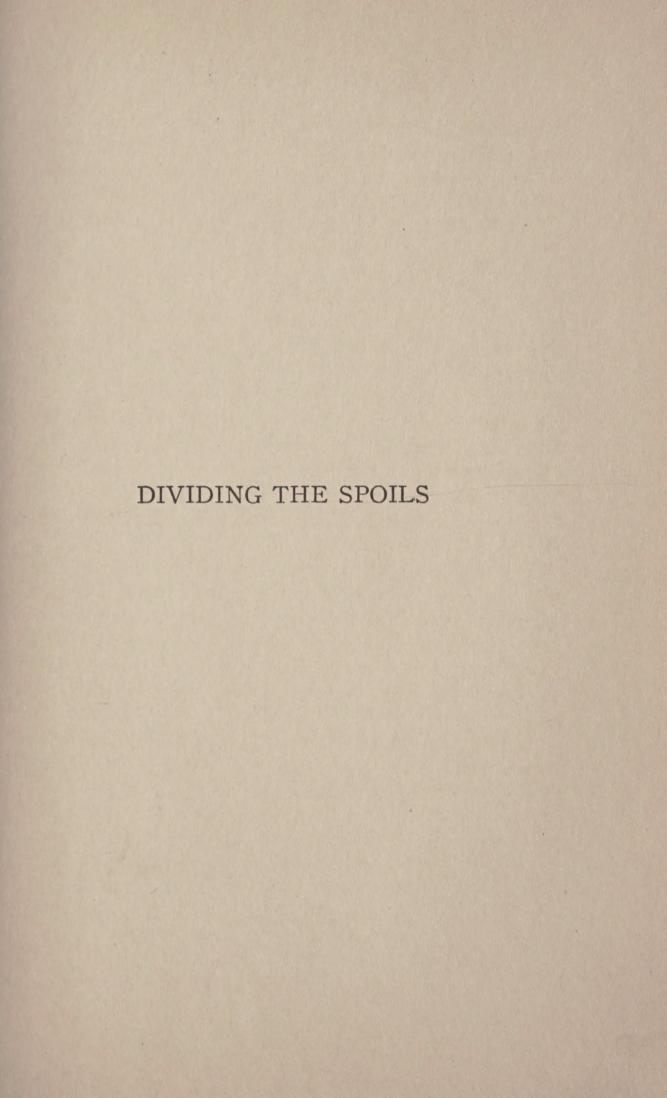
drink and, looking across the river, she saw, through an opening between the trees, Jean Carroll. He had not seen her, but stood like a statue, his fine form outlined against the horizon, his hands on a scythe, his eyes alone showing life, as they followed the now distant horseman.

Even at the distance she was away, she could see a sorrowful look on his face—the shadow of furrows on his brow. Her heart went out to him. She wanted to call to him, to go to him, to tell him she was his friend.

He did not move. The horse had finished drinking and stood idly in the cool water. Ula did not know how long she had been there, busy with her thoughts, when a gun shot rang out from near the farm gate. She glanced in that direction and saw the smoke leisurely rise above the shrubbery in front of the house.

She again turned her eyes toward the reaper. He was no longer there. In his stead stood a savage warrior, with flashing eyes and quivering nostrils. his scythe gone, and in its stead a shining rifle. He stood but an instant, then, like an avenging demon, stooped over and ran along the fence toward the house.

Ula was frightened at she knew not what. She turned her horse and, through the fast-gathering darkness, galloped home.





CHAPTER XXI

DIVIDING THE SPOILS

VER six months had passed since the Bald-knobbers had decided by vote at the meeting in the Skinny Murphy cave, that Skinny should turn his attention to the manufacture of counterfeit money, instead of moonshine whisky. Skinny had not slept at his task, and large quantities had been made, and much of it passed into the hands of the public through different channels.

Word had been passed to the different members that a meeting to divide the profits would be held at the cave on the next regular night. Every one attended. Most of them because they wished a share of the ill-gotten gains, and the others because

they feared to remain away.

The men, all masked, except Skinny, as usual, were seated in different positions waiting for the meeting to begin, when the leader called for order.

All were at once quiet.

"Friends and fellow clansmen," the leader began, "to-night's meeting is a very happy one. It will make up for many of the night rides we have made over the country. Skinny, bring out your box."

Skinny unfolded his long, jumping-jack-like

shape, and shooting his restless glance here and there, said: "I'll have to have some help to carry it."

There was a loud laugh at the significance of this

remark, and a number sprang up to assist.

"Hold on there, boys," yelled the leader; "don't get in a hurry. Jim, you and Ben and Sol may

help; the rest of you sit down."

Soon the four men came, carrying a heavy box from the rear of the cave, and placed it in the centre of the group. Skinny unlocked the padlock and displayed the big box filled to overflowing with shining dollars.

"Now, boys, here are several thousand dollars," the leader said; "but this is not all. Every one is expected to turn back half of all they have collected. We will commence on our right. How much, Jud-

kins?"

"I was given five hundred dollars and have exchanged about all of it. Here is what I got; divide it."

The leader quickly divided the money and handed Judkins his half. "The balance we'll lay on the box," he said.

They went around the group in the same manner, each giving his report and handing in half he

had secured in exchange.

When they came to Chris Ming he rose and, drawing a buckskin bag from behind him, said: "Boys, I objected to going into this and so have not disposed of any of my part. I have returned it as it was handed me."

"The hell you have!" exclaimed the leader. "Then you'll get no share of the profits."

"I do not want a share."

"Oh, you are trying to play good, are you? Well, we'll see about you soon," then turning to the crowd said:

"Boys, we will divide the profits in a few minutes, but before we do I wish to caution you about two men who are a danger to us. They are Jean Carroll and the stranger that stops with him. That stranger is no fool, and the sooner he leaves the country the better it will be for us. What do you say about giving him his walking papers to-night. It might teach Jean Carroll, that d——d mixed blood, a good lesson. Hell! what is that?" he exclaimed as a faint halloo came from the back of the cave.

All eyes turned in that direction. Murphy jumped to his feet, saying: "It's a panther. There it is in that crevice." The leader pulled his revolver and fired, but the "panther" escaped.

"Well, boys, I guess I missed him; but I thought I was close to his eye when I fired. How do you

suppose the beast got in there?"

"Maybe you killed him, cap," said Skinny. "I'm

going to see, anyway."

He took down a candle from the wall and shambled up to the crevice where the "panther" had been seen. The leader began to count out the money into piles for the members.

"Say, Judkins, come here," called Skinny. "Ain't

this the place where we saw the varmint?"

"Yes; right in that hole. Did Bud kill it?" asked Judkins, going up to where Skinny was peering into the crevice.

"No, I guess not. What kind of tracks is that

thar on the muddy bottom?"

"I can't see, Skinny; hold your light higher. Oh, hell-fire! it's a man's track."

"Hush! Don't talk so loud. Shall we tell the others?"

"Yes, I guess so; but how did he get in there?"

"I don't know, unless—yes, that's it; that panther cave must come clean through the hill. Yes, I know it does, for sometimes I can feel a current of air coming through there. Let's tell the other boys."

When they reached the crowd Bud had just finished counting the money, and he said: "Well, it's

counted, boys. Skinny, did I hit the beast?"

"No; but I wish you had. Do you know what it was?" All turned at his words. "It was a man!"

All sprang to their feet. Half a dozen began talking at once; others ran up to the hole to look.

"Come back here, you fools!" shouted the leader. "Don't you know he's liable to pick you off one at a time from around some corner? How did he get in there, Skinny? You had charge of the door."

"I've not had charge of the door that he came by. There's no opening from here into that place

that a man can pass through."

"What do you mean, you fool? Do you think it

was a ghost?"

Several of the men began to look at each other with paling cheeks. Skinny answered: "No; it was

no ghost, but a real man; and he must have come in through the panther cave. I propose that we hurry around there and catch him as he comes out."

"You'd be too late, Skinny. If he's a spy—and of course he is—he's hurried out as soon as he was discovered, and he's gone by this time. Boys, what

had we better do?"

"We'd better get rid of all this stuff and scatter," said a big man from the rear. "He won't have enough men to raid us to-night, and all we've got to do is to get all evidence out of the way here. We were all masked and he can't swear to any of us."

"I wasn't masked. What'll I do?" Skinny asked. "Oh, you'll have to look out for yourself," replied

the leader.

"Well, boys, when I go there'll be a crowd,"

Skinny drawled out.

"D—n you, Skinny; quit croakin'; it makes me nervous. You'll be taken care of. Boys, Jake's plan is a good one. Jake, you and Bob and Pete and Bill may take the stuff and sink it in the deepest part of the river. Take the molds and all."

"No, you don't; them molds are mine," Skinny broke in. "I'll take care of them; I may need

them."

"All right, Skinny; you may keep your molds. Now, boys, every man of you come by here and I'll pay him his share. Then all get out and scatter, and don't try to pass any more of the stuff soon. I'll keep watch around to-morrow, and next Friday night we'll meet at the Falling Spring and decide what to do."

"Bud, hadn't we better try to find out who the man was?" one asked. "Then we will know what to do."

"Leave that to me; I'll report at the spring meet-

ing. Now, some of you lead out."

The men began to leave, one by one; those still remaining talking to each other in subdued tones. Their old bravado was gone with detection con-

fronting them.

Bud followed Chris Ming from the cave. When they had reached the shelter of the woods, Bud said in friendly tones: "Chris, I don't want you to turn against me. I love Mollie, and want you to help me with her. You will, won't you? I'm not such a bad fellow, and now have a pile of good money laid by."

"Bud Jones, it is cruel of you to speak so to me. You know that Mollie does not love you. Why don't you get some girl that does? Why don't you

marry Ula Dean?"

"Damn Ula Dean, and all her aristocratic family. I love Mollie, and I'm going to have her. That slick-faced Rogers is dangling around her too much. Do you hear?"

"I'll see what I can do; but, Bud, some day you'll drive me too far, and then I'll show you what I'll

do."

"Now you're getting gay, are you? Maybe I'd better send you to the pen. Perhaps a convict's daughter would look at me with more favor. Oh! that touches you, does it? Well then, keep that city fop away from Mollie, and all will be right."

"Look here, don't you say any more about that, Bud Jones. I told you I'd see what I could do, and I'll do it, but you must keep your mouth shut. What are you going to do about the man who saw us?"

"I'll do enough. I'll track up the coward and find who he is, and then he'll never tell any more

tales. I turn off here; I'll be over Sunday."

Chris rode home broken in spirit, his face careworn. He said to himself: "I've tried to be a just and upright man, but my loyalty to the clan I helped to form has been my ruin. I cannot stand arrest and disgrace. It would kill my wife and Mollie. Still, I had rather see Mollie dead than the wife of Bud Jones. I ought to tell her how it is, but I can't. She would hate me."

Late the next afternoon Mollie went to the spring to get water for supper. Chris followed and met

her as she turned back to the house.

"Mollie, little girl, you mustn't get mad at what I must ask of you," he said as she approached him. "I have good reasons for it. I've tried to be a good father to you."

"You have been good to me, and you know I

won't get mad at my dear old dad."

"Don't talk that way, Mollie, or I can't stand it. Mollie, you must quit going with Martin Rogers."

"Oh, father, why do you say that? He's a good

man."

"I can't tell you why I say it, but you must. Will you do as I say?"

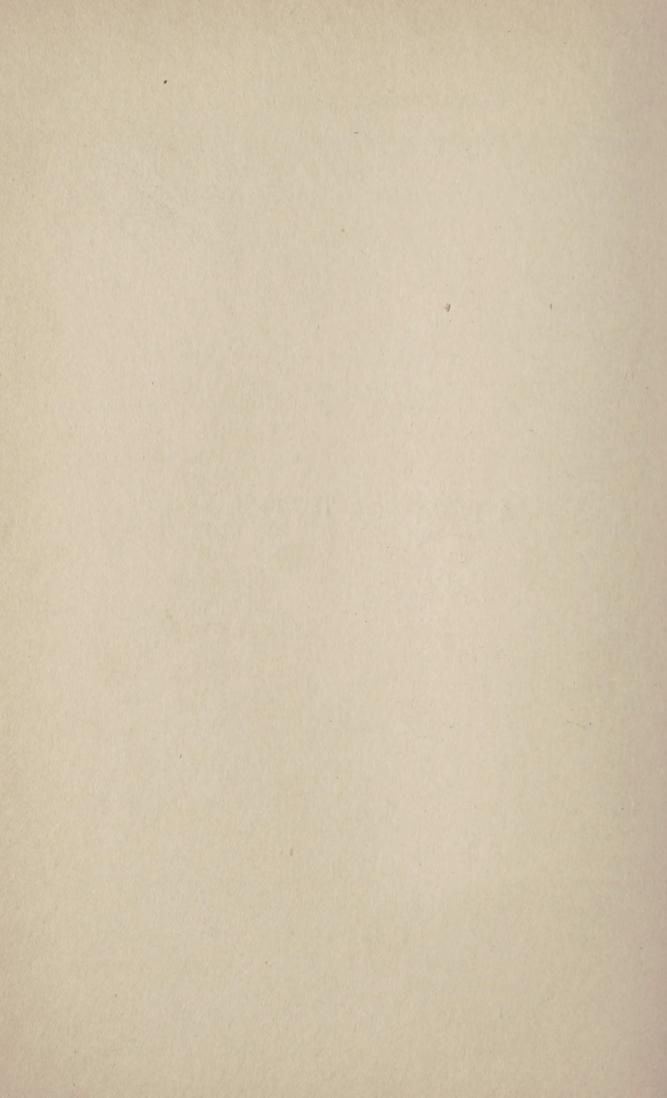
"Yes, daddy, I'll do as you say; but, oh, what [245]

will I do?" and she dropped upon the grass by the pathway and began to cry.

Chris hurried away, hating himself and all the

world.

A PLEA FOR JUSTICE



CHAPTER XXII

A PLEA FOR JUSTICE

HEN Jean reached the house from the lower pasture he found all the farm hands there before him. They were greatly excited, and hurried here and there, none of them knowing what to do. On the porch lay the stranger, an ugly jagged wound in his back, a pool of blood at his side.

He smiled at Jean and reached out his hand to him as he approached, tried to raise himself, stran-

gled and fell back—dead.

The body was gently carried into the house and laid upon a bed, and a few minutes later a horseman started for the county seat to notify the cor-

oner and the neighbors along the way.

Jean, shocked almost to a stupor, sat by the bedside, his face in his hands. He did not speak; he did not move. For hours he sat buried in thought. How uncertain was life. When the stranger left him in the meadow he was thrilling with life and hope; now he lay cold in death. But for a mistake by the murderer, he, Jean Carroll, would lie there pale and cold while others watched around him. Bud Jones had murdered, but had mistaken his man.

Neighbors gathered in from far and near. Si-

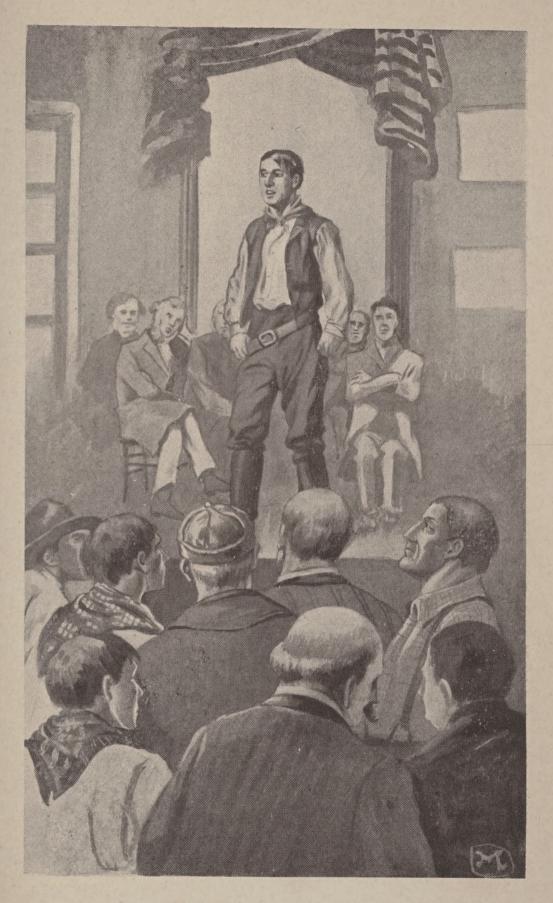
lently they came in to view the dead. Jean saw them not. Sam Miller asked Jean if he would eat some supper. He would not hear him. Later they asked if he would not rest and let them watch, but they were answered nothing. All through the long hours of the night and all the next day, he sat as if the whole world was dead; watching and weeping alone for the stranger in a strange land, who had died for him.

Late in the afternoon the coroner, a whisky-wrecked physician, arrived. He came blustering into the room and ordered all to stand back, and give room for the jury; a "hoodlum" set brought from the county seat. The county attorney was there, red-eyed from liquor drinking. He examined the buildings and premises as if he expected to find a clew to the murderer, and asked loud and insinuating questions of the farm hands present. He impressed the bystanders with his official importance and show of cunning.

When the jury had examined the body and the murdered man's belongings, witnesses were called to testify. The attorney did the questioning. The first called was Tom, the farm hand. He knew but little. He was the first to arrive. The stranger had fallen on his face, and had been shot in the back, from the woods in front of the house. There was but one shot. The other farm hands had arrived directly after him, and Jean in a few more minutes. The stranger was wearing one of Jean's wide-

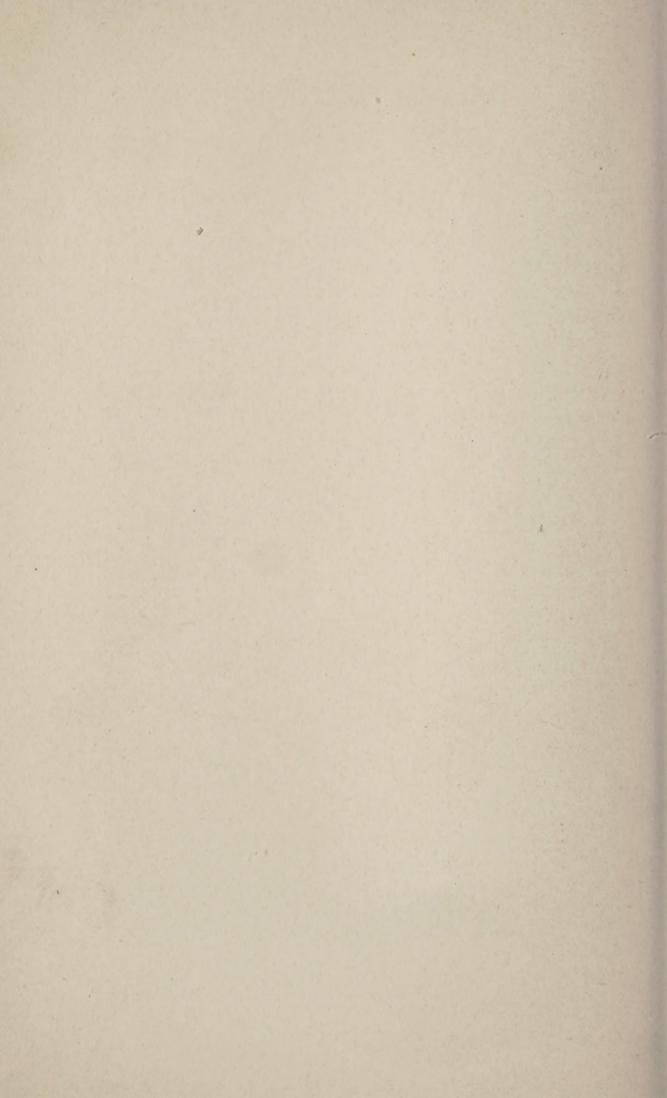
brimmed hats when found.

The other farm hands testified about as Tom [250]



"Honest voters, you are in the majority, will you control? Will you nominate this ticket?" The answer was a clear, "We will!"

(Jean Carroll.)-P. 247.



did. One of them had noticed that Jean carried his rifle when he came to the house.

When these witnesses had been examined Jean

was called.

"Were you acquainted with the deceased now before you?" was the first question he was asked.

"Yes, sir."

"How long have you known him?"

"About eight weeks."

"Do you know his name?"

"I do not. He said he was a stranger, and I knew him only by that title."

"What was his occupation?"

"His occupation while here was a secret, and I do not feel free to mention it."

"Under the law you must answer."
"Well then, he was a prospector."

"A prospector; yes, very likely. Do you know

how he came by the shot that killed him?"

"No. I did not see him shot, but I saw the smoke from the gun, and heard the report, and a few moments before saw a man ride toward the spot from which the shot came."

"You did not see the man shoot?"

"No, sir."

"Then you need not tell who the man was. It would not be evidence against him."

"But the man acted very strangely, and I have

reason to believe he shot the stranger."

"You need not give them; but you may tell the jury whether you had a rifle when you came to the house after the stranger had been killed."

"Yes, sir; I had my rifle with me."
"You may stand aside; that is all."

Jean walked away, agony written all over his face. The inquest was a mockery. The murderer was to be shielded and an attempt made to cast sus-

picion upon himself.

The jury was told to bring in their verdict. They were out only a few minutes, and could be heard laughing and talking while away. Their verdict read: "We, the jury, find that the deceased, an unknown man, came to his death from a gunshot wound in the back, such wound inflicted by an unknown person."

In the stranger's valise, which was turned over to the officials, no name or letter was found that could assist in discovering his identity. Several dollars in cash were found in his pocket. These were taken and preparations made for a county

burial.

Jean had one of the neighbors ask the officers for the privilege of caring for and burying the dead.

The privilege was readily granted.

"Yes, let him have the stiff," said the county attorney. "It saves the county money. Boys, let's be off; it'll take us till night to get home. I want to rest up for the speaking to-morrow afternoon." With loud talking and laughing the officials and their "hangers-on" rode away toward town.

The next morning, in a green, shady lot, close by the grave of Jaques Murray, the stranger was laid to rest. Jean was the only mourner, but there were many damp eyes in the congregation that listened

to the stirring words of the preacher, and witnessed the sorrowful features of the strong young man.

The funeral services were closed. Jean knelt for a few moments beside the new-made mound, then rose and made his way across the hills toward

the county seat.

It was a big day for the politicians. Crowds of men thronged the streets when Jean reached the town. Groups of farmers were standing on every corner expressing their views. The county officials were nearly all candidates for reëlection in the fall, and these men were very busy shaking hands, laughing and talking with their friends and henchmen. Among the workers were Bud Jones and other leaders of the rougher element, all assisting in the work of the day.

Jean waited until he caught sight of the sheriff, a big, jovial-looking man, who held the office, not because he was competent, but because the Bald-

knobbers knew he would not harm them.

The sheriff greeted Jean warmly, and gladly complied with his request for a private talk. Jean was known as a leader among the better class of men of his neighborhood, and as such would be courted by the candidates.

Jean at once told his business. He began with the story of the stranger's coming to his home, and closed with his murder, telling all except the visit to the cave, and who was seen riding toward the

house.

At first the sheriff seemed interested, but became

uneasy when he found that he was expected to investigate the murder, and arrest the murderer. He wanted Jean's support, but he wanted the support of the offenders also.

"Did you see the man do the shooting, Mr. Car-

roll?" the sheriff asked.

"No; I did not see him shoot, but I know who it was, and can produce all the circumstantial evi-

dence that you would need to prove it."

"It would not be worth the trouble. He could not be convicted on such evidence. I regret very much that it is so, but we can do nothing in the matter. All we might do would be useless. Please excuse me now, as I have an appointment with some friends."

"No; I will not excuse you." Jean spoke with determination. "I ask you to do your duty, and your time belongs to your duty before your friends. Will you investigate this foul murder?" he demanded.

"No; I think an investigation useless."

"You won't investigate it? Then, sheriff, what some say—that you are owned, soul and body, by the toughs—is true. I'll make that refusal cost you your office."

"Oh, you will, will you? Well, go ahead, you

d—d Indian, and see who comes out ahead."

Jean turned away without a muscle in his face moving, and took his seat near the speaker's stand.

The sheriff and a friend, who overheard the conversation, joined Bud Jones and his crowd, and had a hearty laugh over Jean's backdown. He had taken a "cussin" without resenting it.

The speaker was a man of ability, and spoke long and loud, touching upon every national issue of the day, but avoiding the only live issue before his audience—the enforcement of the law. He praised the county officials for their work and advocated their reëlection. When he closed there was a chorus of cheers.

Jean at once arose to his feet and moved toward the stand. His friends, who did not know he was present, looked on him at first with surprise, and then with admiration, as he, with his long, curly hair tossed back from his brow, mounted the platform.

The chairman did not recognize him, but shaking his hand, inquired his name, and then introduced

him to the waiting audience.

Jean moved to the front of the platform without a falter. Before he arose he feared that coming before so many would unnerve him, but his college training, his natural fearlessness, and a just cause, gave him strength and he felt at home. He looked

the crowd over carefully, and then began.

At first he spoke in low, soft tones. He told these men of the woods the story of their country homes. He told them of the hardships of their ancestors. What they had endured that his hearers might prosper; of the county, its growth and development, and of the great possibilities it contained.

His words were striking a responsive chord in every heart, and every man gave close attention. Then the voice of the speaker increased until it rang

through the clear air and echoed from the adjacent

buildings. He was saying:
"Friends and fellow voters of this, the fairest county on God's green footstool: I came not here to tell the story of our forefathers' deeds; I came not here to boast the hidden wealth of our lovely hills; I came not here to speak in the name of any party, creed or clique; but I came to speak in behalf of the fairest name that any language contains, the name of that Goddess of all Liberties-Justice.

"Sixty years ago our fathers settled this fair land of ours and established their homes. For thirty years they lived in peace—Justice ruled. No man's hand was raised against another. We were neighbors; friends. Then came that dark and bloody hour, not from trouble within, but from dissensions without. Our fathers took sides and there was war. The Goddess Justice slept. But, thank God, war has ceased. Each, the Blue and the Gray, see life in a broader light, and we are enemies no longer. Not enemies, but friends and neighbors.

"The cruel war is over-has been over for twenty years; but peace has not come. Justice is still dethroned. The soldier from the battlefield has lain down his arms, but the murderer, the plun-

derer, still defies our laws.

"Friends, law-abiding citizens, our county needs our help. Let us lay aside our prejudices and join together for the good of our fair land. I do not want to stir up a fight against any man as a man, or against any party as a party; but I come in the name of law enforcement and justice.

"Two days ago a stranger was foully murdered at my door. To-day I asked the officials to investigate the crime, but they answered me 'No!' I have called upon our officials for justice; they will not grant it. I now come in the name of that unknown Christian stranger, who lies beneath the whispering pines, and appeal to the highest tribunal in this glorious land of ours, the common people, and ask of you that boon, Justice."

As the impassioned words died away in the distance all was for a moment silent. Then there was a murmur that grew and grew until the town rang with a rousing cheer. When quiet was restored,

Jean continued:

"Friends, I ask that a Law and Order Party be organized—not for party power, but for our county's good, and I ask that a ticket of good, sober, law-abiding men be at once nominated.

"Honest voters, you are in the majority, will you

control? Will you nominate this ticket?"

The answer was a clear "We will!"

"You say you will, and I know you will do what you promise, and the nomination of that ticket means the death-knell of those of our land who want to live by tribute, theft and murder."

There was a great commotion when Jean closed. The leaders, who had been taken by surprise, tried to rally their forces, but they had lost their control. An old veteran, with an empty sleeve, jumped upon a box and announced that all who favored a law-and-order ticket would meet in the courtroom

in ten minutes. There was a general rush to the

appointed place.

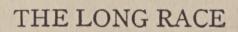
Jean left the platform and hurried away. Many tried to speak to him, but he only nodded, and when pressed, he said: 'No; I will take no part but to vote," and he walked away across the fields towards the forest.

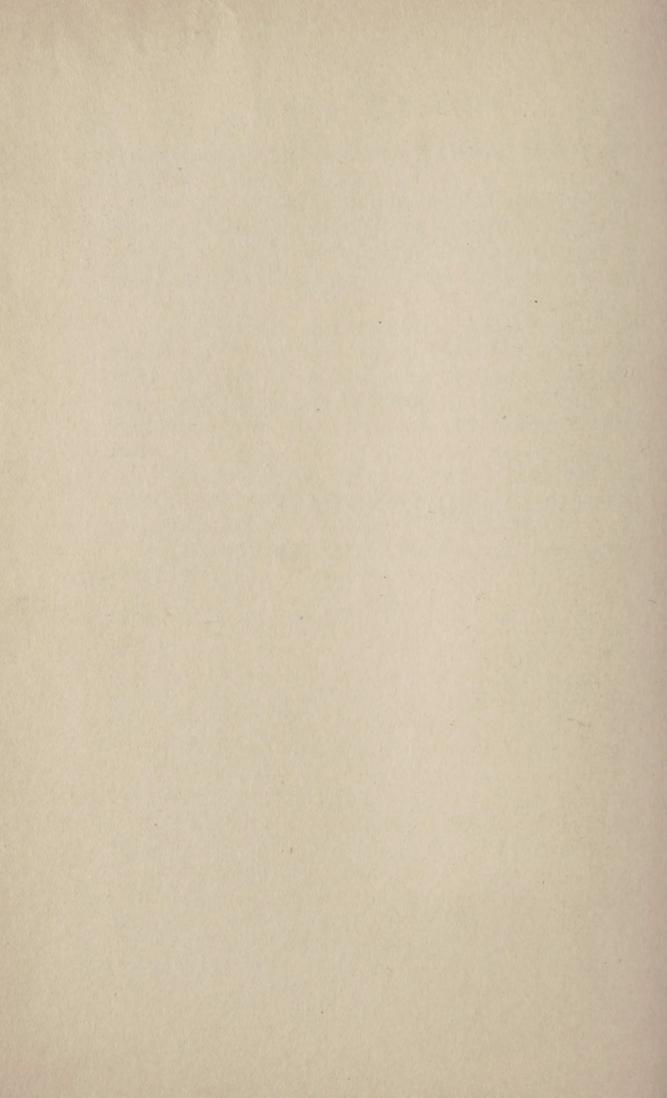
The courtroom was crowded. All wanted "Law and Order." All that was needed was a spark to light the fire. A complete list of candidates was nominated, among them being Frank Jackson for sheriff. Frank was called on for a speech. He said:

"Friends, I'm no speaker, and I care not for office nor for power; but for the good of my county and in the name of Justice, I will accept."

His words were cheered loudly and the meeting

closed.





CHAPTER XXIII

THE LONG RACE

WHEN Jean left the county seat he plunged into the near-by forest and picked his way in the direction of the Irish Wilderness. He felt that his surroundings were smothering him, and that he must get into the wild, free woods alone. The contact with Nature in her purity soon revived his spirits, until he felt that he again cared to live. If only the good people would join together and do their duty, things might yet be well.

By nightfall he had reached Hunter Jack's cabin on the mountainside and stopped to take supper with his boyhood friend, and to talk over with him the incidents of the past few days. He found the old man at home, moulding bullets for his old muz-

zle-loading rifle.

"Well, Jean, I'm glad to see you, my boy," the old hunter said when his visitor had been seated. "I've heard of the happenings of the last few days over at your house, and I think I know who is the guilty coward, but it's not best to say, for I couldn't prove it."

"Uncle Jack, I know who did the cowardly act, but the officers would not let me tell what I'd seen,

but tried to leave the impression that I was the guilty party. I don't mind what they say, but I hate to think I can do nothing to avenge my murdered friend, even though the shot that killed him was intended for me. But I will avenge him, Uncle

Jack; I will avenge him."

"Jean, I'm an old man, and had passed the years in which revenge seemed sweet before you were born. Revenge is sweet only in anticipation; afterwards it is often bitter as gall. I've lived in the woods a long time, and have learned to love Nature and the wild things of the woods, and I find their ways pleasant ways. Nature never seeks revenge."

"But what shall I do, Uncle Jack? What would

you do?"

"I'd obey the law; you cannot stop lawlessness by disobeying the law. Abide by the law and you and yours will win in the end. I told the Baldknobbers that they could never make this a lawabiding country by violating the law themselves. Now the clan is the greatest menace to law enforcement we have."

"Uncle, you are right; I will try to do as you say. I will work to secure officials that will enforce the law."

Then to change the subject the old hunter asked: "Jean, where have you been that you haven't any gun?"

"I've been to town, uncle, and just came back here for a short visit with you. I am going on home. It will be nice and cool through the wilderness now."

"Why not stay until morning? You are tired al-

ready."

"I was tired when I came, but the good supper and good advice you have given me have rested me, and I will go on home. Come over to the farm and get some apples. There's plenty and to spare."
"I'll come, Jean; but I wish you'd stay all night.

It's a long walk home."

"I don't mind the walk, uncle. Good night."

Jean started out through the pleasant night in better spirits than he had been since the exploration of the cave. The old hunter's advice had decided his course. He would abide by the law. That was the way to get the help of law-abiding citizens. Perhaps things would not be so bad, after all. If good officials were elected things would soon be right again. Outlawry would have to stop, or the offenders would be punished.

He had just climbed a long ridge and feeling warm and in a quiet mood, he sat down by a large

pine on the brink of a deep cañon to rest.

How beautiful was the night. The moon was setting low in the distant west and the twinkling stars in the cloud-flecked sky dimly showed the outlines of the great trees on the mountainside, and intensified the darkness in the valley below. How peaceful was the world of Nature. The winds in the pines whispered of peace. The soft, fleecy clouds in the starry heavens closed together and clasped hands in token of peace. A whippoorwill far down the valley called to his mate on the hillside, singing his song of love and peace; and down

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the river, mellowed by the distance, was heard the loud call of the great horned owl. All nature was at peace. All the world was at peace but poor, insignificant man. And to the woods dreamer the trials and troubles of the past few days seemed almost a dream, and he felt he might awake at any moment and find it had all passed away.

The dreamer sat thus for an hour, enjoying the solitude, viewing the scenes of his past life, which seemed spread out before him like a book, when

he dropped off to sleep.

He awoke with a start. Around him were the friendly trees and above him were the friendly stars, but there was a change. What was it? He bent his head and listened. Far down the valley he heard the rattle of horse's hoofs on the gravel. He listened again and another hoof beat was heard on the mountainside, and then another and another, all coming toward the valley below him.

The first horseman reached the foot of a big forked pine and stopped. Others came, and others,

until there were a dozen or more men present.

Jean waited and watched. It was a meeting of the Bald-knobbers, he knew. What was their mission to-night?

For awhile the men talked in low, muffled tones, but when the last man had arrived the leader clapped

his hands and all turned toward him.

"Boys," says he, "I've called the clan together because we've got some hard work to do. I invited just you fellows because I know you are all true to the clan, and will do what's needed and not quibble.

"Our clan has been very successful in the past and for years has controlled the county. Controlled it without much opposition, but opposition has come at last. The office-hungry crowd at the county seat has been waiting for a chance to beat our fellows for years, and now they've found it. A fool of a leader has started them out, and that fellow must be made to know his place or we will be downed. To-day's work at town must be overcome, and the way to overcome it is to stop the man who started it. If he is allowed to go on it means the election of anti-clan men this fall. If to-day's nominees are elected, many of our men who are lukewarm now will quit us cold and help the officers against us. With their support the officers could ferret us out, land us in jail, and the devil will be to pay.

"How many of you would like to face a trial for killing Lem Anderson? We might handle the officers after they were elected, but that makes too plain a case, and the boys wouldn't stand for it. The best way is to stop the leader, and kill the whole plan in its infancy. With one man out of the way, the whole thing will go to pieces. This man needs

a lesson. Shall we give it to him?"

"Yes," was the reply.

A small man at the rear of the crowd asked:

"Who is this fellow?"

"Who is he? Why, it's that white-livered French Indian, Jean Carroll. I thought you all knew who I meant."

"Jean Carroll? Why he seems like a peaceful fel-

low."

"Yes, he seems peaceful enough, but he has got to be looked after, if I have to do it myself. If he's

let alone, our necks won't be safe long."

"Well, I'm as ready as any of you to give him a couple of hundred, but we'll hurt the cause if it's done without an excuse. We've already lost the help of some of our best members by useless acts."

"Let such men as are afraid of him go back. They're too afraid he'll hurt some one to suit me. But we've got a good excuse. Suspicion points to Carroll as the murderer of the stranger. He came up with his rifle just after the shooting, and we can charge him with the crime and compel him to leave the country. He'll gladly leave to get away from such a charge and the disgrace of a whipping."

"That's a mighty poor excuse, for everybody knows he's innocent; and he may leave the country, but he'll do it a corpse. He's not the kind that gives

up without a fight."

"Well, I don't give a damn how he fights; we're going to thrash him. When will we do it, boys?"

"Let's do it to-night," said a tall, lank fellow, whose brown jean pants stopped clear of his socks, as he sat astride of a burry-tailed pony. "I'm just achin' to get a-holt of some fine-haired chap. Let's start now."

"All right, Jim, to-night it shall be, and we'd better be going, for it's ten long miles from here, and you boys all want to be home by daylight. Mount, boys, let's push on, and by midnight we'll lay three hundred hot ones on the fine gentleman's back. We'll lay the plans as we go."

The horsemen rode away up the cañon, and Jean slipped back from the bluff, hardly believing his ears. These men, he knew, were going to his home to whip him. What must he do? He was far from home. They could not find him, but would they not destroy his property. Yes, he must be there and take his chances. But how? He was afoot; the Bald-knobbers were well mounted. Yet—he must beat them home.

He listened. The horses were climbing the hill out of the cañon toward the road, which followed the ridge to the north. He took off his coat and laid it in the forks of a tree, tightened his belt and turned his face to the west. The moon was just sinking over the pine tops on the distant hills; the

hoof beats had died away in the distance.

Jean threw back his shoulders, snuffed the air, like a deer when he scents the chase, pulled himself together and set off at a long, swinging step down the hillside, straight through the forest toward home. From a smooth-faced dreamer he had gradually changed to the rugged features of a warrior, with narrow, piercing eyes and furrowed brow, and as the pace increased the lines of his face hardened until the tenseness was painful. Watumska's blood was telling. The savage was again on the warpath.

On the top of the first ridge Jean stopped an instant to listen, but the hoof beats, as they followed the road, were too far away to be heard, and he swung off again with a still longer stride, down the long slope toward Beaver, and before the first hour had passed the runner had reached the crest of

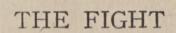
Beaverhill. The horsemen were crossing the creek,

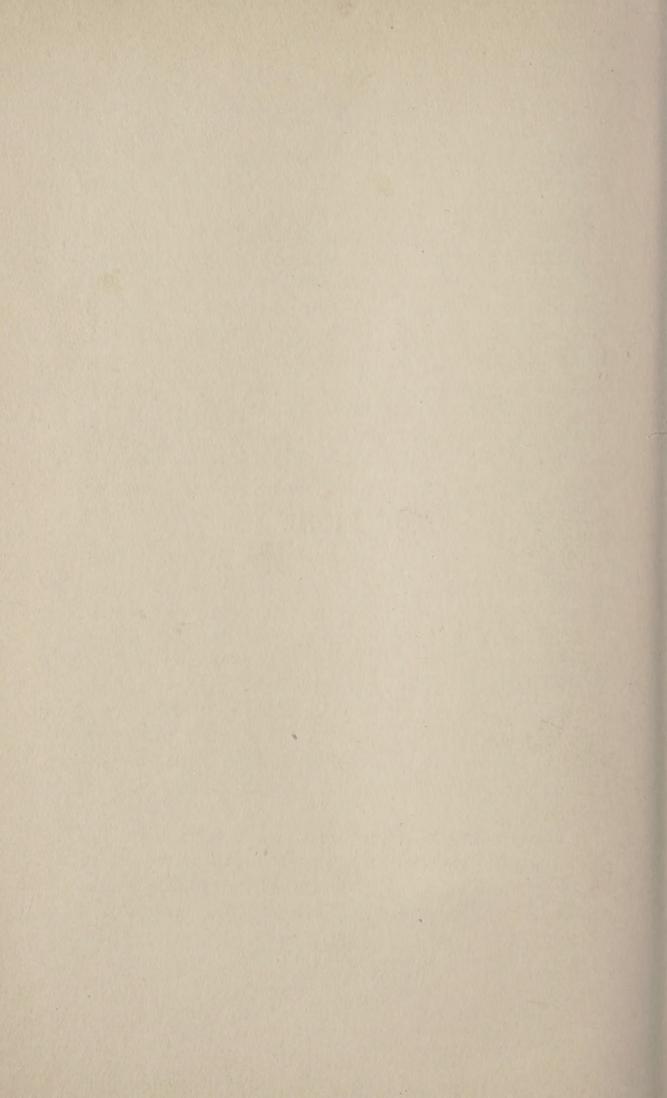
half a mile away.

Six long miles yet to go! The runner increased his pace. With head lowered and body extended forward, the race against time began. Without a halt he passed down the slope to the creek, crossed it where he struck it, and, wet to the knees, climbed the long, steep hill beyond. He did not have to stop to hear the horses now. They were clattering

up the rocky road a half mile to the north.

As Jean neared the crest of the long slope his breath came in quick, choking gasps, and burned its way into his lungs like living flames, but he did not halt. He was even with the riders now, and must lead them on. Down the sloping ridge, four miles long, he sped. The moon had gone to rest, but the stars in the sky resembled balls of fire. The trees as he passed appeared like shadows. The road lost its roughness; the pain left his lungs. He was running, still running, but as if in a dream; and, in this condition he reached home, locked and barred the doors and windows, and crept into the shelter of the shrubbery near the gate to wait. But the man that waited was not Jean Carroll; it was a demon-a demon with bloodshot eyes, grinning teeth and quivering nostrils that waited for the horsemen.





CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIGHT

NLY a few minutes elapsed before there came down from the hill the noise of hoofs. riders were still pushing their horses, even

to a sharp canter, down the steep grade.

The short lead had given Jean a much-needed rest, and as he heard the horses coming he crept deeper under the foliage of the shrubs and awaited their arrival. When nearly down the hill the hoof beats stopped. The riders dismounted and tied their horses in a cluster of pines. They preferred to steal upon their victim as he slept, even if they were a dozen to one. The one might hurt some one.

With the patience of a savage Jean waited. Every muscle tense, like a panther ready for its spring; eyes and ears strained for the least sign or sound. He had not long to wait. Soon the first of the men, stepping lightly on tiptoe, came toward the gate; their faces masked and their rifles ready for action. The others followed and a whispered consultation was held.

As Jean saw the number and strength of his enemies his better nature told him that it would be wiser to steal away. Told him that all chances were against him if he remained and resisted; and that a

failure to find him might satisfy the clan. That to stay and submit meant humiliation, and to stay and resist most likely meant death. Still he was powerless to move. A force within him, stronger than his will power, stronger than his thoughts, stronger than his life itself, compelled him to remain. Only one time did that impulse weaken. He thought of Ula Dean, and wondered what she would have him do, and as he thought his face softened—life was still sweet. But at that instant the men began to steal through the gate, and the chance was gone. Jean, the savage, and not Jean, the lover, controlled. He drew a black silk handkerchief from his pocket, masked his face and joined the crowd.

The house was completely encircled, and all gradually gathered in; one or more at each door or window. Jean took his place with those at the front door. The leader was here, big, strong and commanding, with his broad black hat pushed back on his head; he looked fully what he was—a bully. Jean walked close up to his side; so close that he could have thrust a knife into his heart, but that would not satisfy. He craved Bud Jones' downfall, even his life, but his enemy must know who struck; must face his doom before it befell him. He kept close to Bud's side and waited with whirling brain

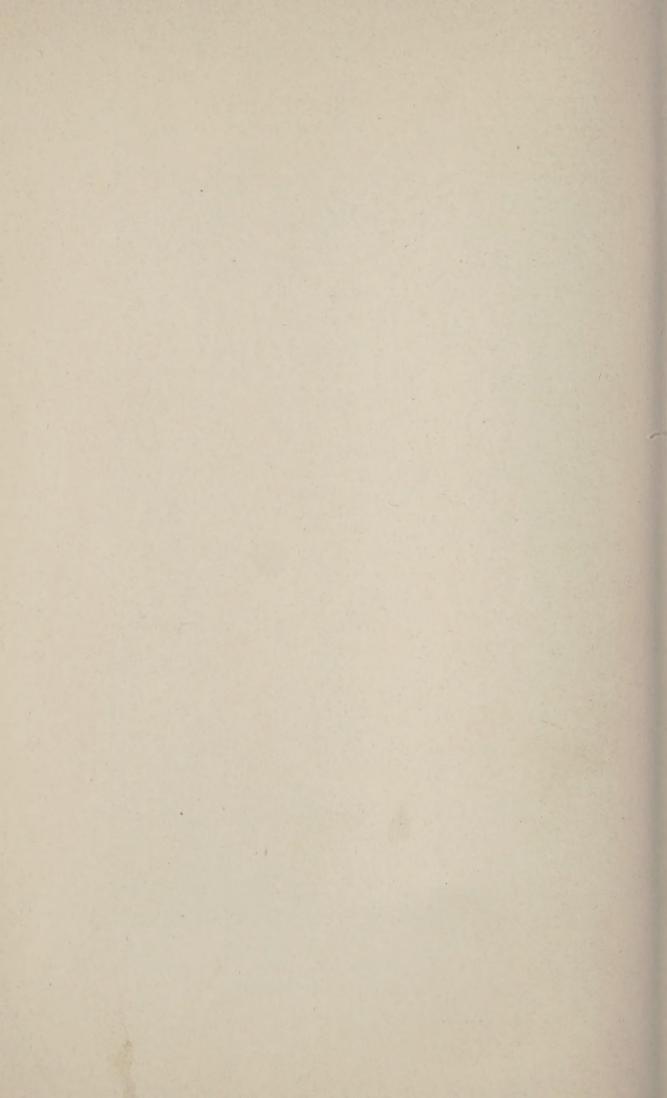
and gnashing teeth.

One of the men stepped to the door and rapped, waited a few seconds and rapped again, this time louder than before. Then Bud Jones, with an air of bravado, stepped to the door, struck it a blow with his fist that made it rattle on its hinges, and in



He clasped her in his great, strong arms and pressed the golden crowned head to his bosom.

(Jean Carroll.)—P. 373.



a loud voice called: "Jean Carroll, open the door and answer for your crimes. Playing baby won't

save you this time."

Jean had crowded up close to Bud. At Bud's first word those near saw something was wrong, but did not understand what. They saw the man's fingers working and his eyes flashing above his mask. As Bud turned from the door, Jean faced him. With one hand he jerked the mask from Bud's face; with the other he unmasked his own. Then for an awful instant they stood; Jean's eyes flashing hatred and revenge, Bud's face showing wonder, amazement and fear.

In a strangely quiet voice Jean said: "Here I am, Bud Jones, ready to answer you, and this is my answer." With his open hand he slapped the big leader fair in the face, and, before he could recover, slapped him again and spit upon him.

Bud's followers had all been cowed by Jean's sudden appearance, but at the second blow, one of them reached up and caught Jean's left arm. A sweeping blow and the man fell backward to lay unconscious

with a broken jaw.

This interruption gave Bud time to think. He raised his revolver to fire, but Jean struck it up and sent the weapon flying across the yard, then the two men clinched.

For an instant they grappled, then they writhed and twisted and turned so fast that neither could be distinguished from the other. The men from other parts of the yard, hearing the noise, rushed to the scene, but if they had tried to interfere they

could not have known where to strike, so swift were the movements of the combatants. But they did not try to interfere; they forgot to act. These men of the woods, who had seen strong men fight many times, stood awed in the presence of the terrible conflict. They forgot everything except that two powerful men were in a struggle for mastery. There, under the dim light of the peaceful stars, was again being fought the battle of all the ages—might against right.

Gradually the movements of the men began to show a purpose. The smaller man was striving with all his might to clasp the other; Jones was striving equally as hard to break away so he could strike a blow. He continued to try to hit Jean's head and face, but at every attempt Jean crept in closer and closer, until at last, with a twist and shove, he locked his hands behind Bud's back.

In the dim starlight, those standing near saw a smile of victory pass over Jean's face; the smile of the Indian warrior as he grasps the scalplock of his enemy. For an instant he paused, then slowly but surely the powerful arms tightened about the big leader. Tightened until Bud's mouth opened. Tightened until his eyes seemed bursting from their sockets. Bud gasped for help, but too late. A wrench, a twist, a shove, and he toppled backward with a scream of pain, blood dripping from his lips, and with several broken ribs.

Jean stepped free and turned in time to meet the rush of the others as they sprang at him. They had at last remembered their part. Jean struck

out; struck without looking; walking forward at every blow. Man after man went down before his strong arms. Jean was almost clear. Bud had crawled to where his pistol lay, and raising it, fired. Jean felt a stinging pain, and at the same instant they closed on him from behind and pinned him to the ground. He felt the blood trickling down his left side, but knew it was not serious, for the stinging pain continued and there was no dead feeling.

The men bound him hand and foot and laid him on the grass, awaiting the command of the leader.

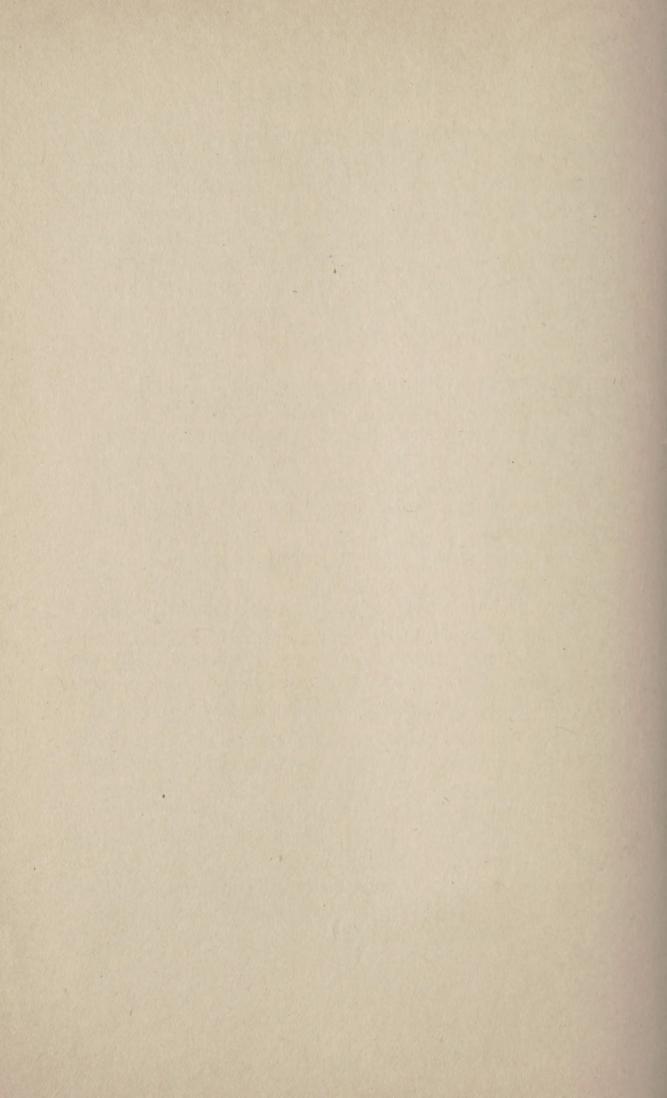
Many of the men had lost their masks and Jean recognized them as men from the eastern part of the county. Men who knew nothing of the right or wrong of the charge upon which they were to chastise him.

Bud slowly raised himself from the ground, pale and groaning.

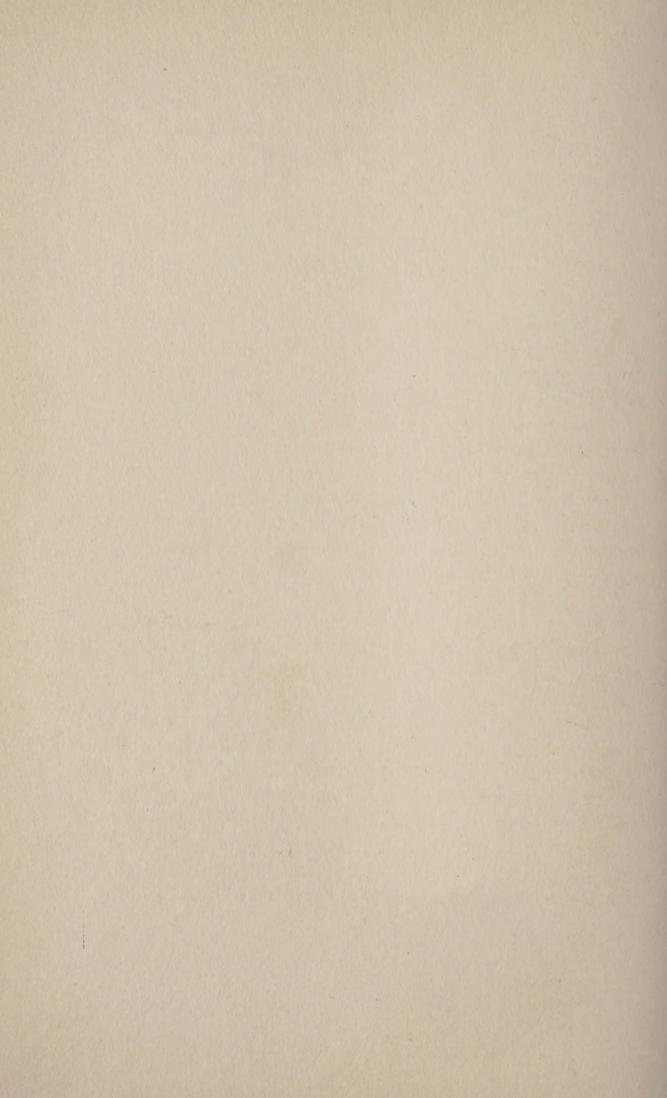
"Here is our man, captain," said the tall man.

"What shall we do with him?"

"Tie him to a tree and cut out his heart with a blacksnake. For a little I'd shoot his d——d brains out as he lies. But it'll be better to hear him beg."



THE ESCAPE



CHAPTER XXV

THE ESCAPE

A T Bud's command the men gathered about Jean to carry him to the woods for punishment, many of them cursing and groaning from the effects of the recent struggle.

"Untie his feet and make him walk," commanded

Bud. "If he starts to run, shoot him."

They moved off toward the horses, but one man did not follow. As the others started, he raised himself upon his elbow, on the end of the porch, where he had fallen, but gasped and fell back with a groan, with the sweat of death upon him.

"Wait, boys, Bill's bad hurt," said one. His comrades ran to his side. They found him gasping for breath with an ugly bullet wound just above

his left eye.

"I'm done for, boys," the dying man spoke; "I feel I'm going. Bud Jones hit me when he shot from the ground. I'm dying without God and without hope. I've been wrong, boys. This business of being hired to punish others is all wrong, and Bud Jones is to blame for it. He's ruined our clan, injured and punished the innocent, and now he's killed me. Jean has done no wrong. I know, for I was watching when the stranger was killed.

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Don't whip him, boys; Bud Jones needs the punishment."

The speaker again tried to raise himself, a look of horror overspread his face and he fell back, strangled and was dead.

The masked men, hardened as they were, turned away with a shudder at the recital of their deeds,

as it were, by the dead.

Jean, his hands securely tied, stood by the gate, Bud on one side and one of the masked men on the other. He heard all, but seemed not to hear; saw all, but seemed not to see. The dying man's statement but endangered the more his own life. Bud Jones could not now afford to let him escape. He expected in the next few moments to meet a horrible death. He had chosen his path; had waited to meet these men, knowing the danger, and now even the promise of release could not wring from him a single concession. He would die, as many of his ancestors had died before him, without a protest or murmur.

When Bill Kryder's spirit had taken its flight to that unknown realm, Bud commanded the men to come on. They came, six of them carrying the lifeless form of their comrade, the others following sluggishly behind, their actions saying louder than words, that they had lost all their interest in their work.

The Bald-knobbers, with their prisoner and lifeless burden, moved slowly up to where the horses were tied. At Bud's command, the dead body was carried to one side, where one of the men covered

the horrid features with a handkerchief. Jean was marched to a big pine tree, placed with his face to it, and a halter rein passed around his shoulders to

hold him in place.

The burly leader seemed more determined than ever that the punishment should go on. He gathered the long, heavy whip and raised it for the first stroke, when Jean twisted around, and looking him in the face, commanded: "Stop!" Bud was so surprised that he allowed the whip to stay in midair, but the next instant brought it down on the unpro-

tected shoulders with all his might.

The blow had an effect like a spark in a powder can. Jean leaned forward, shrugged his shoulders, gave a pull and snapped his bonds as if they had been twine. He turned in time to catch the whip on the second descent, pushed Bud back and gave him a stinging blow across his heavy, bloated face; a stroke that cut to the bone and left its mark for life. Bud's followers stood appalled, and, while their leader was blinded with blood and pain, Jean walked down the hill toward his home.

The passion of the defeated leader knew no bounds. As soon as he recovered from the effects of the whip lash he jerked his pistol and pointed it at the retreating figure. He pressed the trigger, but as he did so the barrel was knocked up and he found himself looking down a steady weapon in the hands of Chris Ming, who had thrown aside his mask and braved the wrath of his irate leader.

"Drop that, Bud Jones. You've committed one

murder to-night; that's enough," Chris said.

"How dare you interfere with me, Chris Ming!

Am I leader here?"

"You were leader, but no man can force me to stand and see an honest man shot in the back. You forced me into this trip, but I determined before I started to kill you before you should kill Jean Carroll, and now I leave you. You can bulldoze me no longer."

"I can't, eh? What about the counterfeiting and other things? I guess I'll have to tell what I know. It means life behind the bars for the tender-hearted gentleman. What'll your gal's dandy lover say to

a jail-bird's daughter?"

"Bud Jones, you speak of my girl again and I'll shoot. You may tell what you please about me, but you bother her, and I'll kill you. Do you hear? Now, Bud Jones, I'm done with you. I'll die before you shall lord it over me again. You bullied me into consenting for you to marry Mollie, and now you want me to stand by and see my best friend shot. Now I quit the clan; do to me what you will."

With these words Chris, with his pistol leveled at Bud's heart, backed to where his horse was tied, mounted and rode toward home.

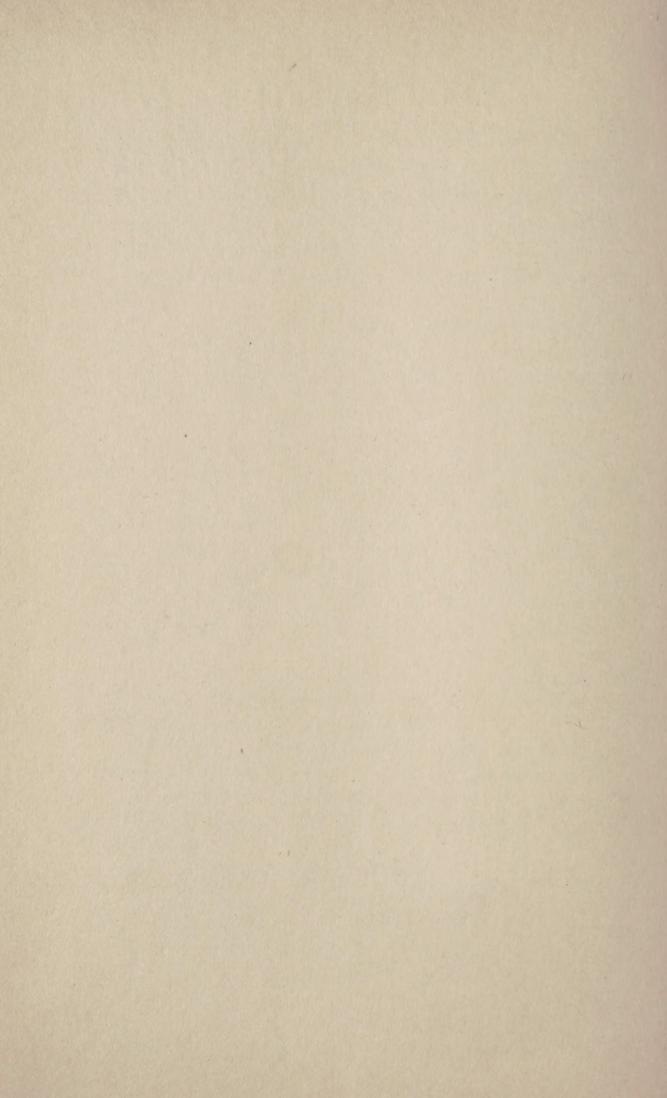
As soon as Bud was from under the pistol he shouted: "Catch him, boys; he'll give us away!"

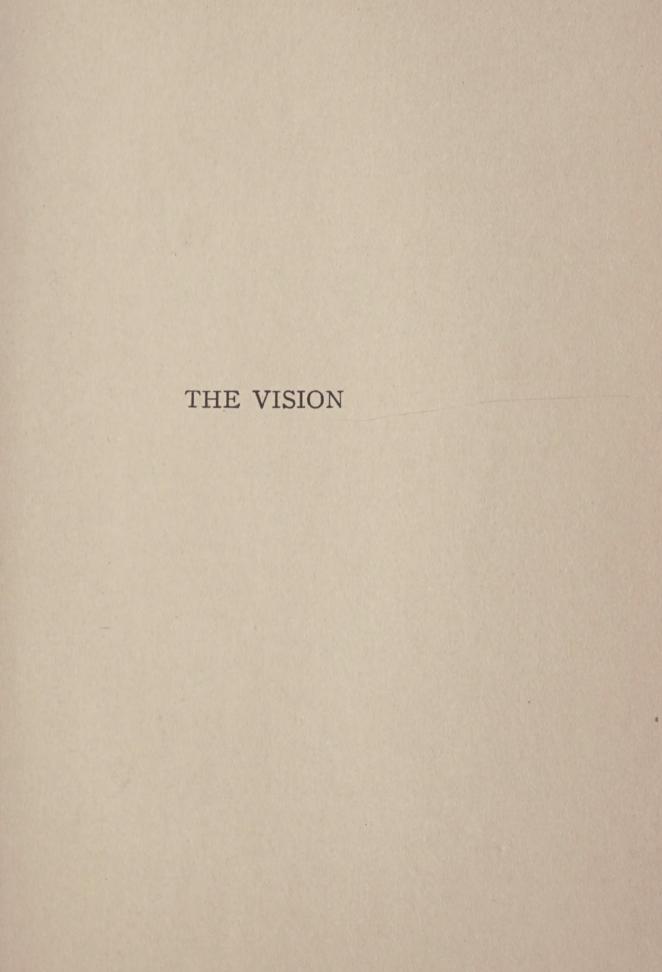
A few started slowly after him, but the main part of the clan did not move, and Chris was soon out of hearing.

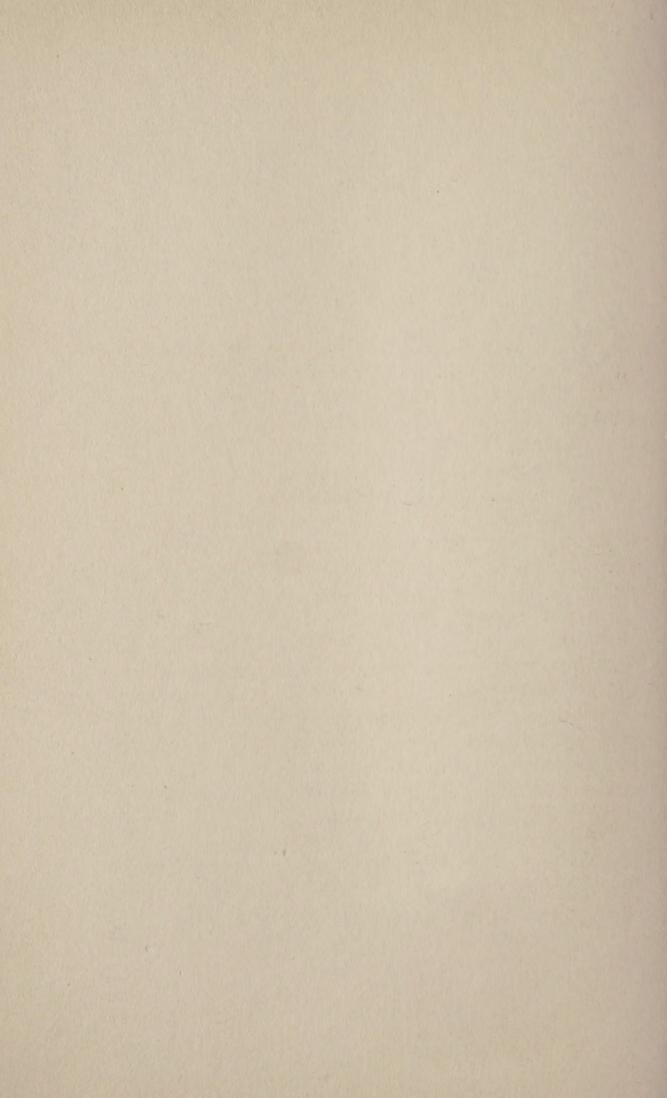
Jean had conquered and outdone the clan; but he

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could not rest. He passed by the farmhouse, only stopping to get a coat, and sought relief for his overwrought feelings by a tramp through the woods.







CHAPTER XXVI

THE VISION

TO sooner was Christ Ming gone than the gang rallied and started in pursuit, but they soon found that they could not catch him, and returned to where Bud stood, swearing and holding his smarting face.

"Did you get him?" Bud asked.
"No; he got away," answered one.

"It may be as well. He won't tell and we can look after him later, but we must have that cussed Indian. He'll go straight after help, if he ever gets away. Half of you watch the horses, and the rest

of us will go and get him."

Again the masked men slipped down the hill, and for the second time began to surround the house, but as Bud Jones and one of his followers crept around the corner they saw by the starlight a figure pass out through the garden gate into the orchard and across the meadow toward the woods. Bud cursed under his breath, and, quietly gathering his men, again prepared to follow.

The men had overcome some of their awe at Bill Kryder's death and parting words, and beginning to fear the result should Jean escape, were ready to

obey any of Bud's commands.

"Boys," said Bud, "he's gone down across the meadow. Now, some of us must follow him through the fields while others hasten around by the road and intercept him by the creek. He must not get away. When you come up with him, see that he does not have another chance at us."

"All right," the men answered, as several of them

began to leave.

Jean left the house by the way of the garden and down through the orchard and meadow. He did not fear the clan, but he would not put himself in their way. His enraged feelings drove him on, and he walked faster and faster as he went over in his mind the incidents of the night. What must he do? Bud Jones deserved death. But should he take the law in his own hands? He could not answer the question.

He was still pondering the matter when he entered the woods below the meadow, and without thought as to where he was going, passed over the hill toward the Dean home. He came to the road near the house and followed it a short distance, wrapped in deep thought. He soon became aware that there was a light in an upper room. He looked

up and stood entranced at the scene.

Seated at a small table at the window, her head bending over as she wrote, sat the woman of his dreams. The rays of the shaded lamp fell on her fair young face. He looked again, and for the first time in days forgot his troubles. Forgot his danger and, worst of all, forgot his accustomed caution and watchfulness. The moment's worship of

the picture in the window proved his undoing. A stooping figure crept up stealthily behind him, a gun barrel swirled in the air and, without a strug-

gle, Jean sank to the earth.

Though Jean fell without a sound, some hidden power caused a shudder to pass through the form of the midnight writer, and she instinctively glanced out at the open window just in time to see the gleam of the gun barrel in the starlight, and then to see a number of forms dart out from the shadows, gather up the stricken man and hurry away through the woods above the spring.

Ula uttered a piercing scream and sank to the floor unconscious. When the family had gathered, and, by dashing water into her face, had caused her slowly to recover, they thought her narrative only the result of a severe nightmare, and her

mother wanted to send for a doctor at once.

"No, mamma," said Ula, "I don't need a doctor; I am very well. If you will all go to bed we will say no more about it."

"That is right, Ula," said Mrs. Dean. "We will

go to bed, but I will stay with you to-night."

"All right, mamma," and the men returned downstairs while Mrs. Dean remained with her daughter, but neither slept much, for Ula, believing she knew who the stricken man was, and knowing she saw no vision, could not sleep.

Martin Rogers, who was more than half persuaded that Ula had seen something, was nevertheless greatly surprised to find, when he examined the road next morning, that there was the imprint of

a body in the dust, and many tracks leading up to and away from the place. He followed the tracks to where they turned into the woods above the spring. To keep from further exciting the family

he said nothing about his find.

Ula, although urged by her mother to remain quiet and rest next day, managed to slip out through the woods and over the hill above the spring, in the direction she had seen the men disappear the night before, expecting momentarily to find trace of their work, and fearing all the while that she would. When she returned to the house, after a fruitless search, she found Martin Rogers excitedly pacing the floor.

"Why, Martin, what is the matter with you?" Ula cried.

"Ula, I don't know what to think. Read that," and he handed her a small envelope containing a note.

Ula took out the note and read it, then read it again, as if doubting her senses. It ran:

"Mr. Martin Rogers, at home:

"Dear Friend—For reasons I cannot now explain, I find it necessary to terminate our engagement. It is but fair to say that no act of yours has caused my decision. Please do not try to see me again.

Mollie Ming."

"What does she mean, Martin?"

[&]quot;I don't know, Ula; she was in the best of spirits
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Sunday, when I saw her. I don't know what to do."

"Why, I'd go at once and see her. She surely

can't mean that you are to see her no more."

"No, cousin; Mollie is a good, true girl. She wouldn't have asked me not to try to see her if she had not meant it, and I will respect her wishes. But what am I to do; my plans were all made, and we were to be married this winter?"

"Martin, we must accept things as they come, and hope that all will be right in the end. Oh, what trouble this country is seeing now. Jean's friend was killed three days ago, and the man I saw last night—I know I wasn't mistaken; I saw a man killed. I almost scream now as I think of it. I gave up last night to please mother, but I know."

"It is bad, Ula; but things will be better after the election. A Law and Order ticket was nominated yesterday. The boys say that Jean caused it. He went from the funeral to the political rally, and made such a stirring speech that nearly all the crowd joined in nominating the independent ticket. Frank Jackson was nominated for sheriff. He's sure to be elected."

"I hope he will, for he'll make a good officer. When have you seen Jean, Martin?"

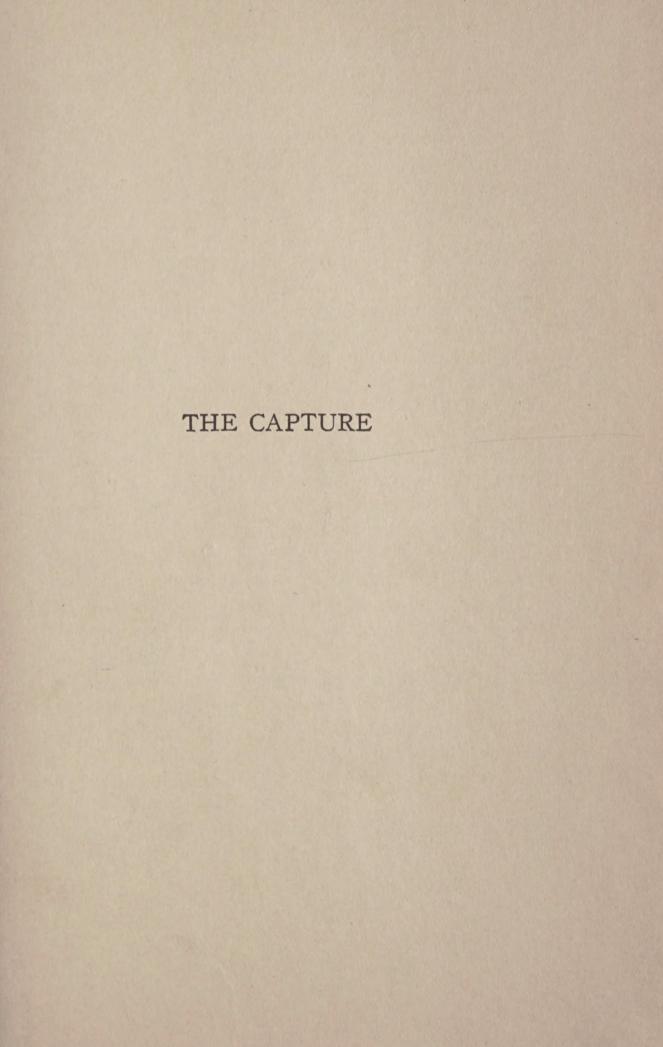
"I saw him at the funeral, but did not get to

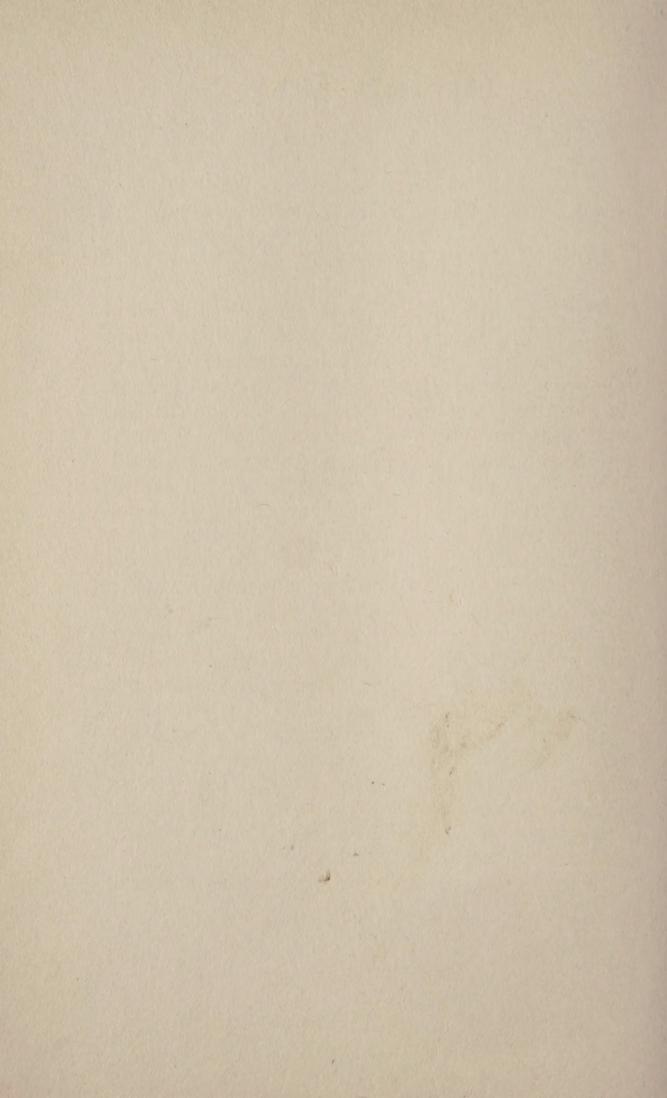
speak to him. He looked awfully broken up."

"I wish that I could see him; I'd try to cheer him up. You ought to go to see him this afternoon, Martin."

"I will, Ula, if you will go to see Mollie and tell her I will respect her wishes, but will always be ready to come when she can see me again."

"I'll go right away. I know she will tell me all she can about what is the matter."





CHAPTER XXVII

THE CAPTURE

THERE are various traditions as to the origin of the name of "Dead Man's Cave," among them being the story of a hunter of early days, who attempted to follow a bear into the pit. He had tried to reach a shelf, which made the first landing in the almost perpendicular wall, by climbing down a grapevine tied to a sapling on the brink. The vine did not reach low enough, but the hunter climbed down to the end and dropped the short distance to the ledge. He was never able to regain his improvised ladder. Weeks later the mouldering form was found, seated on this ledge, its shrunken head thrown back against the wall, its lustreless eyes gazing at the circle of light above. The hunter had died of hunger and thirst waiting for help. The body had been partly covered with dirt dropped from above.

There was another story of a stockman who had been strangled by his partner, and his body dropped into the pit. The body had rolled over the edge of the shelf and out of sight, but for weeks afterward passersby could hear the murdered man's spirit calling to them for help.

These stories, with the belief that the cave was

still haunted, made the spot a shunned place by all the natives, and mothers frightened their children by telling them ghost stories of Dead Man's cave. Many knew the location of the cave, but its character and depth was known only to the extent that its walls could not be climbed.

The people of the Ozarks, like all people who live far apart and much alone, were superstitious. In their loneliness, they peopled all the waste places with imaginary beings, and later became frightened at their creations. Even the men of the neighborhood avoided Dead Man's cave, especially after dark.

When Bud Jones and his men found that Jean had started across the lower pasture from his home some of them followed him, while others, with Bud, hurried to the fence and around the road to where they thought he would likely pass. A part of the men stopped here, while Bud and a few others slipped on ahead and hid themselves by the roadside.

Jean passed the men by the fence without their detecting his presence, and was near Bud and the others when the latter heard his footsteps and followed along the road. His steps were easily heard in the thick bed of leaves that covered the ground, while theirs were almost inaudible in the dusty road. They did not dare to allow Jean to hear them, for they knew he would be armed and that he never missed his mark.

Bud and his men followed on and on. At last Jean stepped into the road, but did not look behind, and, when he stopped, Bud saw his chance. It was not best to shoot so near the Dean dwelling, but the men covered Jean with their rifles while Bud slipped forward. Jean continued to gaze at the form by the window. Bud crept closer and drew back his rifle for the blow.

A false step, a slip of any kind, and Bud knew his life would likely pay the penalty. But there was no slip. Jean stood still, buried in thought, and the blow was struck.

Ula's scream and the flash of lights in the windows frightened the men, and some of them sprang forward, gathered up the stricken man and hurried into the woods. They pushed on through the brush, and did not stop until the top of the hill above the spring had been reached. Here the carriers laid their burden down.

"What a heavy man," said one. "No wonder he

could fight."

"Damn him, he's done fighting now," said Bud; "unless he fights the fiends in hell. What shall we do with him, boys?"

"Let's leave him right here," said Skinny Murphy. "It's as good a place as we can find. He's

hard to carry."

"Yes; you'd leave him here to be found the first thing in the morning, and then Chris Ming would report us before we could get him. Chris knows our ways, and will be hard to get without hurting

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some one. What we want to do is to get the report out that Jean killed the stranger and has run away to keep from getting caught."

"Well, then we ought to take him to Granny Moon's cave. No one would ever find him there,"

said the tall fellow.

"You'd play hell," Bud snapped out. "Didn't he and the stranger find us, and for all we know they've already reported us. Besides, we don't want any rottin' carcass around there."

"Let's take the body over into Bug-a-boo cañon,"

suggested another. "No one ever goes there."

"That's too far to carry him," spoke up one who had helped to carry the body up the hill; "he pulls down awful. Ah, I say, boys, I have it. Let's drop him into Dead Man's cave; it's right here ready at hand, as the preacher would say. We'll drop him in there and then start the report that he has run away for killing the stranger."

"Well, let's drop him in," said an old grizzled fellow. "The sight of him lying there makes me creepy. His eyes look like they're seein' us, an'

then some one might pass."

This idea made every one move, and Bud said: "All right, boys, I believe the cave's the best place. Gather him up and come on."

The men lifted the body by its arms and legs, carried it to the cave, pushed it over the brink and hur-

ried back.

"Now, boys, let's get back to the others," said Bud, and all started across the hill to where the horses were tied.

When all the men were together again Bud said: "Boys, we've been in hard luck to-night, but things will be better now. That damned Indian is out of the way for good and all. What we want to do is to keep this night's work quiet and beat that ticket that was put out yesterday. Then all will be well.

"Jim Harvey, you take Bill Kryder's body home, and tell his widow he was accidentally shot while you were coon hunting together. That will keep

all suspicion down.

"Now, all of you get your horses and scatter, and remember you are to think that Jean killed the stranger and skipped for fear he'd be caught. Don't spread it on too thick or you'll betray yourselves. Tim Crawford has been to Springfield and will be back to-morrow. I'll get him to tell about seeing Jean nearly there as he started home. That will get all to looking that way, and will help to quiet Chris Ming, for Chris will think that at last Jean was scared out. We'd better let Chris alone until he quits watching so closely. He won't tell, if nothing more comes up.

"Boys, help Jim tie Bill's body on his horse. All

get your horses and git, till I notify you."

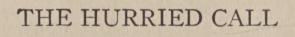
Jean had received a very heavy blow, but it had not struck him squarely, and the skull was not fractured. He had been unconscious while being carried away, but the jolt when they dropped him on the ground revived him. He was very weak and could scarcely have moved had he tried. He heard the conversation about him, but it was several minutes before he regained consciousness sufficiently on

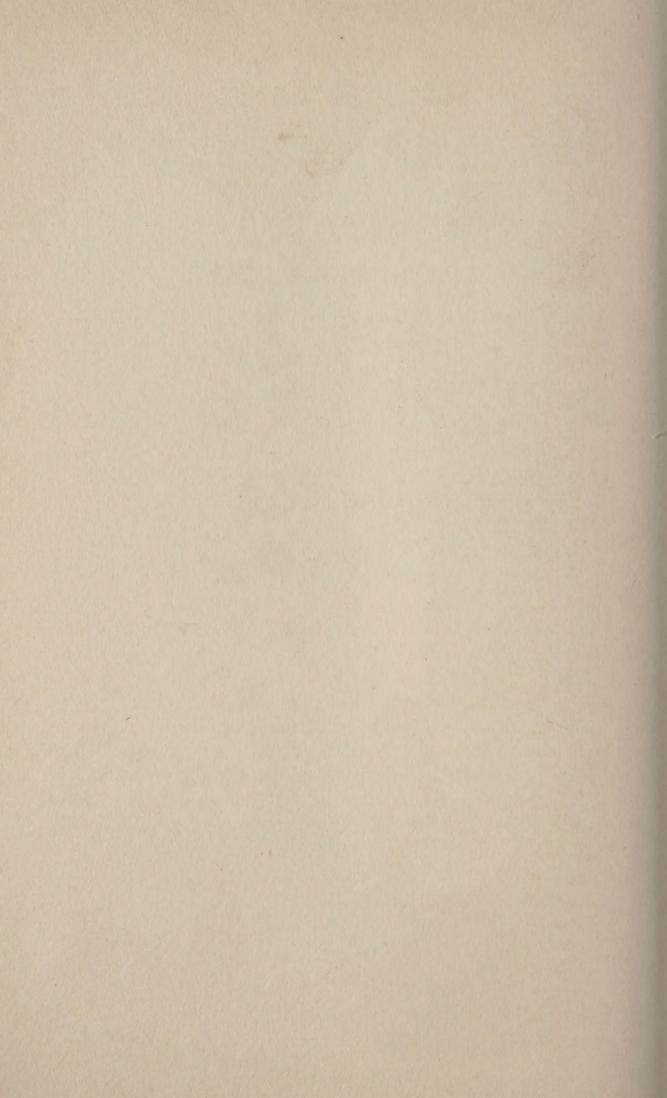
understand. When he realized who the men were he knew his only chance to escape was to seem to be dead, and without a movement he suffered them to carry him to the cave and drop him into the dismal pit. He felt the rush of air as he fell—then all was darkness.

When he opened his eyes he found himself resting upon a soft bed of earth and decayed leaves—the hunter's grave. He raised himself and could see objects around him dimly. He felt of himself, and found that he was badly bruised about the body and had a severe wound on the head, but no bones were broken. The wound brought back his memory, and he began to realize what had happened.

He was in Dead Man's cave, but he was alive, and surely some one would come along and rescue him. He felt very dizzy and leaned back against

the soft earth and was soon asleep.





CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HURRIED CALL

WHEN Chris Ming escaped from the Bald-knobbers, after defying Bud Jones and the clan, he went at once to the homes of other members that he knew opposed Bud's methods, that he might notify them of what he had done. They all agreed to stand by Chris in his position, and to join together for mutual protection should Bud try to force them into unlawful acts. It was afternoon when he reached home.

When he came in sight of home he saw Mollie in the garden, caring for some flowers. Tears were running down her cheeks, but she brushed them away and tried to look cheerful when she saw her father approaching.

"Oh, daddy," she cried, "where have you been

all night and all day? Did you find the cattle?"

"I've not been hunting cattle, little girl; but I've had lots of trouble. I hope it's all over now. Sit down here and let me tell you something about it."

They sat down on a log at the woodpile, the roughly-clad, bronzed-featured mountaineer and his fair daughter, a resemblance in every feature, but with all the father's characteristics softened by youth and womanhood.

"Now what is it that has been troubling you,

daddy?"

"Mollie, it's Bud Jones and his doings that's been troubling me. Bud is a bad man, and I'm ashamed that I tried to get you to be kind to him, but you need do so no more.

"There's been some crimes committed in the past that, although I was innocent of them, Bud has threatened to swear I had committed. I know he could prove anything on me that he tried, for he has some fellows that will swear to whatever he says. This commenced several years ago, and he has been using his threats to drive me into different acts ever since.

"I have obeyed his orders and been his tool to save you and your mother the disgrace of having a father and husband in the penitentiary, for with the county officers on his side he could easily swear me into prison. He made me tell you to stop Martin Rogers coming here, and I almost rebelled, but I gave in, knowing I needed to be where I could watch him for a while longer; but last night I defied him and now I am free. They may send me to the penitentiary—they will if they dare—but if I go, I will go innocent. Did I do right, Mollie?"

"Of course you did, you dear old daddy," and Mollie threw her arms about his neck and kissed his roughened cheek. "Of course you did right. Why should you suffer such treatment and I not share it? It would be more disgraceful to associate with such a man than to be an innocent con-

vict's daughter. But we'll not let him send you to prison. We'll have new officers after the election,

and then you'll get justice."

"I hope so, little girl; it's been a long time coming. But I'm glad I'm done with Bud Jones, and if anything comes up, Mollie, remember that no matter what they prove, your old dad has always done his best."

"I know you have. I've known you were bothered a long time and wanted to help you. Now that I know what it is I can. Don't you be afraid I will ever doubt what you have told me. Something seems to tell me things will be better now."

"I hope so, and now, little girl, you may let your friend come when he wishes, for I want to see you

happy again."

"Oh, you dear old daddy, you've made me so happy now. I know everything will turn out better."

"I think so, but Bud is a bad man. I am not going to do anything, unless he commences on me; but if he comes, I'll give him the best I've got."

"I know he's a bad man. Oh, how I hate him."

"Yes, Mollie; but hating will do no good. Now go ahead and finish your flowers, and let me hear a song instead of seeing tears."

"I'm not going to work any more; I feel too happy. I'm going to write some."

Seated at the window, where the summer breeze could fan her cheek and she could hear it singing its soothing lullaby through the pines, Mollie tried

to compose a note to Martin Rogers that would express her feelings, but no words seemed good enough, and she only wrote:

"DEAR FRIEND—The trouble is all over and I will be so glad to see you any time.

"Your loving "MOLLIE."

Just as the note was finished Ula Dean came to the gate and Mollie ran to greet her.

"Oh, Ula, I'm so glad to see you," Mollie ex-claimed. "I've something good to tell you."

"I'm glad to see you so happy, Mollie. Tell me what the good news is."

"Did Mr. Rogers tell you about the note this

morning?"

"Yes, dear; and what was the matter?"

"I can't tell now, Ula; but it's all past. I have

just written him another note. Here it is."

Ula read the note, then gathered Mollie in her arms, as she said: "You dear girl; how happy Martin will be, and you can still be my cousin and my sister, too."

"Was Martin mad at me, Ula?"

"No; he was just puzzled and hurt. He will be sure to come over to-night. He's gone over to see Jean now. Have you seen Jean lately?"

"No; I haven't seen him for a long time to talk to him; I do hope he will come over with Martin.

If he does come you must come, too."

"No; I couldn't do that, Mollie," but she looked

away toward the great forest that Jean loved so well, with a longing expression in her tender blue

eyes.

The two friends, seated on the edge of the shady porch, talked for an hour or more, making plans for the future, and discussing the recent troubles of the neighborhood, yet neither of them had heard, or was soon to hear, of the attack on Jean at his home.

At length Ula glanced at the lowering sun and, rising, said: "Mollie, it's getting late, and I must go, but you go home with me."

"No; but I'll go a pieceway with you if mother doesn't care. Mother," she called, "I'm going a

pieceway with Ula."

"All right, Mollie; but don't be gone after night."

Arm in arm the two girls walked down the road through the murmuring pines, Mollie accompanying her visitor part of the way home, as is the custom in the Ozark country.

"Ula, will you give my little note to Martin?"

"Of course I will. I'm so glad to get to carry

such good news."

They walked slowly down the winding road, each busy with her own thoughts, when Mollie stopped her companion, saying:

"Wait, Ula; I hear horses' feet."

Ula listened. "No, Mollie; it's your own heart beating; you're too happy."

"No; I hear a horse's feet."

"Yes, so do I now, Mollie. What shall we do?" "Maybe it's Jean. Let's wait and see."

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Soon the rider came into view. It was Sam Miller. "Good evening, girls," he called to them. "What a fine evening for a stroll. I wish I could stop with you, but it's getting late and I must push on. Have you heard the latest news?"

"No; what is it?" both cried together.

"Jean Carroll has left the country. Tim Crawford met him this morning nearly twenty miles from here, headed for Springfield. Some think there's something wrong, but I don't believe it. I think he's only wanting to rest up a little after the trouble he's had. Poor fellow; I hope he will soon be back again his old self. His leaving will hurt the Independent ticket. I, for one, believe Jean is all right," and Sam rode on.

Ula turned pale at Sam's words, and Mollie noticed that she shuddered, but she controlled herself until Sam was gone, then she gave way, and, placing her head on Mollie's shoulder, burst into tears. "Mollie, I feel that something's happened to Jean.

I'm so lonesome."

"Don't cry, Ula. I know how you feel, for I've just been through it all; but the sun is shining now for me, and it will soon shine for you."

"I can't keep from crying, Mollie. I don't believe Jean's gone; I'm afraid some one has injured

him. But I must go now. Good-by."

"Good-by, Ula. I hope to see you to-morrow," and Mollie turned and started toward her own home.

Ula hurried on through the darkening shadows. For the first time she felt frightened at the forest.

The wind was rising and the pines seemed to play a funeral dirge. She looked around to assure herself that it was the woods she knew and loved, but look where she would she saw the dim outline of the face in the starlight—the gentle, but strong face and the broad, strong shoulders, and then the cruel blow. She shuddered and stopped at the vision, then, closing her eyes to all except the footpath, she walked faster and faster until she was soon running toward home.

When she came in sight of the house the family carriage was standing at the gate. A rider had come from Springfield with a message that her Grandfather Dean was on his deathbed in faraway Virginia, and all except Martin were to start at once for Springfield to take the morning train

for the East.

All were ready except herself, and Ula hastened into the house to prepare for the journey. When she came out she said: "Father, where is Martin?"

"He had to go after some of the cattle that had strayed. He said for me to bid you good-by for

him."

"I wanted to see him very much. Must we start

before his return?"

"Yes, Ula; we've no time to lose if we catch the train, and it means a day earlier, and possibly the only chance to see father alive."

"Who is going to stay in the house?"

"May and Ben are going to stay while we are gone. They will come in the morning."

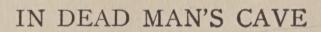
"All right, father. I'll be ready in a minute," and

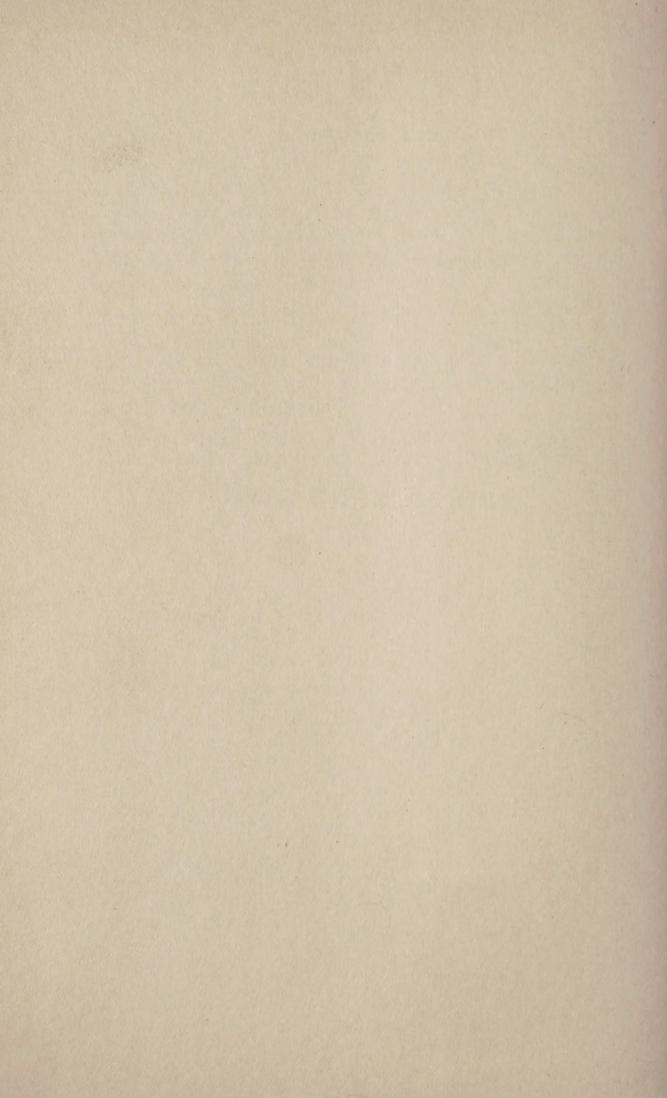
she ran hastily back into the house and to Martin's room. Taking Mollie's note, and writing on a large sheet of paper the words: "Here is a note from Mollie," she pinned them to the cloth on Martin's table. The door was locked, and with a sad heart she climbed into the rear seat and was driven away on the long night's ride.

Her face brightened a little as she thought of the report that Jean had gone to Springfield and she might see him. But her spirits soon fell. She could not believe him gone, for she felt it was he that she

saw from her window.

They caught the morning train for the East. Three weeks later, dressed in mourning, she returned to her mountain home.





CHAPTER XXIX

IN DEAD MAN'S CAVE

7HEN Jean awoke the second time in the cave it was dark all around and he knew it was night again. He was still confused, but after stretching himself, his mind cleared and he knew where he was. He felt in his pocket for a match, struck it and looked at his watch. It had stopped. The match burned up and scorched his fingers. He threw it down and it rolled over the edge of the shelf on which he lay. He watched it as it went down, down many feet, revealing a large cavern as it fell. He instinctively drew back from the edge and reached for another match. There were only two in his pocket. He selected one, but thought better of his act before lighting it, and put it back in his pocket with the other. Then he set himself patiently to await the coming of day. The wait was a long one, and gave him plenty of time for reflection on his condition.

He was positive he was in Dead Man's cave. He was equally positive that no one who knew of his plight would come to his aid, and he reasoned should those who knew about him come, would they not try to kill him instead of save him?

He was still pondering in his mind the probability

of his discovery by some one that would help him, when he noticed that he could dimly see the walls of his underground prison, and looking up found it was daylight overhead. He guessed it was six o'clock, wound and set his watch and felt far less lonesome when he could hear its familiar "tick,"

tick" in his vest pocket.

By this time the cavern was light enough for him to see his surroundings. He found the place on which he rested to be a break in the wall of the cavern about thirty feet from the top, and that the walls above him were straight and smooth all the way down. The bench was about six feet square, and sloped gently toward the side of the ledge over which he had thrown the match. On the bench was a heavy bed of leaf mould, damp and soft, and showing, from the coloring on the wall, that at some time it had contained more of the mould. which had slipped off into the cavern not long before. Scattered about and protruding here and there from the mould were the decayed bones of some large animal, or a man, and Jean shuddered as he remembered the story of the bear hunter of long ago.

As soon as the sun had reached a point where its rays struck the walls of the shaft, Jean began to explore his prison, for as such he now recognized it. He found that on three sides of the shaft were solid walls, but that on the fourth side there was a large, steep passage, which led down the side of a huge cavern. The walls of the lower cavern were almost perpendicular on the left, but directly along

the right side of the shelf was a steep, stony surface, with cracks and crevices and loose, broken

stone, like the crater of an extinct volcano.

The light did not penetrate far down this rough stairway, but Jean determined to explore it as a possible means of escape, and with the hope of finding water, for his wounds were causing a maddening thirst. He crawled slowly to the edge of the shelf, let himself cautiously over and began to climb down the rough incline. At first he could hardly drive himself into the unknown darkness, but his thirst spurred him on, and he climbed slowly down and down until all light failed him.

By this time he was so fatigued with his climbing and so weak from his wounds and the lack of food and water, that he was forced to climb back to the ledge to rest. When he reached the bench he found the light almost gone. He looked at his watch. It

was four o'clock.

He lay down on the cool, soft mould and was soon fast asleep. He awoke, and it was another morning. His watch showed eight o'clock. His limbs were not so sore, and the wound on his head was much better, but his thirst was not relieved.

Water! Water! If he only had water.

He climbed over the edge of the shelf with the strength of despair, and in half an hour had reached the point that had taken half a day before. He had learned the way, and the fifty-foot incline did not seem so dreadful as on the day before. He pushed on down, but soon reached a point where, try as he would, he could not reach another foothold. The

descent had become perpendicular. He began to

feel that his climbing had all been in vain.

He stopped and studied long what he should do. While thus waiting, from out of the darkness of the cavern came a splash of water, as if a pebble had been tossed into a pool. He almost shouted for joy. Then doubts began to assail him. Was it a trick of his imagination? Was it a trick of the demon thirst that possessed him? He listened long and carefully. Again he heard the splash, the de-

licious splash of water.

He almost felt that he was saved. Then came the stubborn fact: The water was deep in the cavern; how could he reach it? How reach the bottom of that pit of blackness alive? He thought of his matches, his meagre supply of two, but halted long before deciding to break his precious store. The water splashed again; the decision was made He took from his pocket the little bundle, unrolled the wrapping from the tiny sticks, worth many times their weight in gold, selected one, and putting the other in his pocketbook, placed it in an inside pocket and prepared to make a light He selected a smooth, dry stone, and gave the match a nervous scratch. It failed to ignite. He tried again, and this time the light burned up bright and clear.

As the match blazed up a large cavern was revealed. It extended off beyond the rays of light. It also revealed that his stone stairway extended no farther, and that it was a sheer precipice of ten feet to the bottom of the pit. This bottom could be

easily reached by a drop and jump, but once reached

there was no way by which to return.

Just as the match was almost burning his fingers he strained his eyes into the deeper darkness of the cave. In the centre was the smooth surface of a pool of water. The light failed, and all was darkness.

Jean studied long and seriously before he decided what to do. By making the little leap he could quench his killing thirst, but the jump once made could not be changed; it put him beyond all chance

of escape from above.

At the thought of escape he forgot his thirst and his hunger, and quickly climbed back to the ledge above, and lay down to wait for help to come. Occasionally he called as loud as he could, but he well knew no one could hear him, unless they were at the mouth of the cave.

When night came on he again fell into a sleep, a restless and dream-troubled sleep, from which he awoke in the morning with a thirst that would not be quieted. He struggled with his desire for water for a short time, then hurriedly crawled down the stony stairway and dropped over the ledge to the floor beneath. All was absolute darkness, but he instinctively crawled toward the stream and drank till he could drink no more, then, without further moving, he lay down and slept peacefully.

When he awoke Jean opened his eyes and tried to look around him. There was no ray of light. The thought that he was blind flashed over him, until

he remembered his leap and where he was in the cave.

Jean's savage ancestors had given him the disposition to accept things as they came, without question, and to adapt himself to his circumstances. As soon as he had taken another drink from the cool stream, he began to examine his surroundings. He felt of his pocketbook. The precious match was safe. He tried the stream that flowed through the cave. It was a large stream, and flowed to his right. Then he remembered Hunter Jack's story of the muddy spring, and wondered if the stream could

be followed to safety.

He now moved cautiously toward the point where he first landed, but, before leaving, he marked the point where he had slept with a large stone, and laid a line of stones as he crept forward. He moved slowly and carefully in his explorations, and hours had passed before the size of a large room had been fully examined. At last he reached a point where there was leaf mould and loose earth that had come from above. It contained the footprints where he had landed. Near by he found a round, smooth object. He picked it up and passed his hand over its surface. It was a man's skull. He placed it carefully down by the wall. He cast his eyes upward and saw, far up on the side of the cavern, the reflection of a ray of light. It cheered his spirits. It gave him a starting point for exploring, and "there was light above."

At this point Jean gathered a large pile of stones, and so arranged them that he would know in which

direction to look for the light, and from here fastened all the different points of the cave in his mind. For hours he had crawled about on the rough stone floor and had come back to his "watch tower" to sleep, when he thought of keeping track of the days. He at once sought and found a niche in the wall near by and placed therein three stones, to mark the days that had already passed, and thereafter each day, when he could first see the light's reflection, he placed a stone in the niche.

When the stones had been placed Jean again crawled back to his "watch tower" and lay down, and, although he was becoming weak from the lack of food, he soon fell into a sound sleep, and did not wake till the light was again on the wall. He marked the day by another stone, and set about fur-

ther exploring his cave.

When he started out he was surprised to find how much better he knew the way about his prison. He could already walk upright from his "tower" to the stream, counting the steps almost unconsciously.

His first steps in exploration were to go around the walls of the cavern. He started out, walking slowly, one hand on the wall, the other guiding his front, carefully feeling the floor with his feet before stepping. He traveled this way for hours. He crossed the stream where it entered the cave, and recrossed it where it passed out. Where the stream left the cave there was an opening large enough to follow, but he passed it by, and was thinking he had better turn back when his foot touched a pile of stones. It was his "watch tower."

The light had disappeared, and he lay down and slept again.

He awoke. The light was in sight and a new

stone was laid in the niche.

He at once went to the outlet of the stream to explore it, and found that a current of air was coming in at the opening. He felt that escape was at hand. He followed the stream several hundred feet, sometimes walking, at other times having to crawl to get through the narrow passage. At last he came to where the stream flowed through a small lateral crevice too narrow for him to follow. The bed was hard stone and had not been cut by the waterflow. In vain did he endeavor to find some way around the narrow point. No place could he find.

While crawling through the stream with his arm reaching under to see if there was a possible place to make an opening, he thought he saw a gleam of light on the water. He dropped his head farther and, oh, joy! ahead was a plain reflection of light upon the water's surface. The point was far away, yet it was light—the glorious light of day.

There could be no question now as to the stream he was following. It was the source of the Dean spring, sometimes called the Roaring Spring from the noise it made as it poured from the earth.

Jean tried every way possible to pass the crevice, but to no avail. He could not pass the narrow cleft, and his hopes fell again. He turned back to his "watch tower" almost discouraged.

The ray of light had disappeared, another day had passed with no way of escape, and starvation fast reducing his strength. He lay down to sleep almost discouraged, and dreamed horrid dreams of demons tormenting him with food held just out of reach; but, despite the dreams, he awoke much refreshed, and with new hopes in his heart.

As he sat up before determining what to do, he heard a splash in the pool, the same splash he had heard while climbing down the stony stairway the second day. At once it entered his mind that there might be fish in the pool. Why had he not thought of that before? He was so excited he could hardly take the time to count the day with another stone.

He hurried to where he knew was a large pool, but on his way up the stream found a much smaller one. He stopped to explore it. He waited long and patiently for a sound. He knew that if the smaller pool contained fish, his chances for catching them would be much better than in the larger one. If he could only see! If he could only see! Why not use his precious match? It would never be needed worse, and he could arrange to keep the light awhile by using the leaves from his pocket Bible, Ula's Christmas present. In this way he could keep the light ablaze until he could examine the big pool also.

He took the little book from his pocket, where it had been carried since first received, hesitated and put it back. But the pangs of hunger overcame all else, and snatching the book out again, he hastily tore out a dozen pages, and folding them carefully into strips, prepared to light the match—the last

chance for a light until freedom was gained, or time for him was no more.

The match was carefully taken from the pocketbook and preparations made for striking it. The launching of a battleship is of no more importance to the builder than the striking of this match to Jean Carroll. Its lighting meant at least a saving of many hours of toil, and might mean life against death. With the feeling of the balloonist as he leaves the earth, or the diver as he enters the deep,

Jean struck the match upon a stone.

The match blazed up and scattered the darkness and brought good news. The pool was alive with small perchlike fish. Jean almost forgot the folded leaves of the book in contemplating this chance for food. When the match was burned low, he lighted one leaf after another and examined the larger pool. It was also teeming with fish. There was food in plenty, if he could only take it; and he would take it. As the last taper burned down he looked around his cavern home almost lovingly. Would it be his last sight of things material?

The burning paper scorched his fingers. He dropped it into the stream, and, still burning, it floated off until it burned out. What if it had floated on without burning out? Might some one not see it? Yes, might they not see a paper dropped into the stream, a paper with a message upon it? The thought gave him new hope. A message might pass to the outer world, and here was food to support him until the message had been found. Yes, he would write. Would write at once, and was get-

ting out the precious present again, when he remembered it was night. He must wait until daylight. He put the book and pencil into his pocket

and began to plan to catch the fish.

His ancestral independence came now into play. For untold generations his grandfathers had been forced to wrench from Nature, regardless of circumstances, a sustenance. The deer must be taken without a gun, and the fish without a hook. There was food in the pool; it was his place to get it.

The fish in the pool must be caught.

Jean pondered the best plan to follow. Three ways presented themselves: Get into the pool and catch the fish with his hands as they hid under stones; make a seine of a part of his clothing, which meant a serious waste, or to divert the channel out of the pool, dip it dry and have the fish in his power. He chose the latter plan, and at once began his work.

He first built a stone wall across the stream above the little pool. It let the water through freely. Then he built a line of stones down one side of the pool and plastered them with mud. When this was finished, a large supply of mud was gathered, and, when all was ready, this was plastered over the first stone dam. The water swirled against the dam, turned aside and ran down outside the primitime levee. The pool was cut off.

Draining off the water was an easy, though slow task. He had no vessel, so used his hands, and in two or three hours began to feel the fish darting against his fingers. He caught one, killed it, cleaned

it, washed it in the running stream, and sat down to his first meal for days. The taste of the food made him ravenous. He almost snapped off the bites, eating flesh and bones alike. He wanted more, but denied himself, and turning some fresh water into the pool, crawled away to his bed. He slept the first real sleep since his imprisonment. He had food at his command and hope in his heart.

He awoke in the morning to send his first message down the stream, a message written on a leaf of the precious Bible, and laden with a world of hope and fear. It was sent adrift with a prayer

that a friend would find it.

The blind learn to forget the loss of sight; the deaf the loss of hearing. Jean had become accustomed to the absolute darkness of his cavern home. He could now walk freely all about it. His wounds had healed, and with an abundance of food his strength had returned, and with it strong hope of

being rescued.

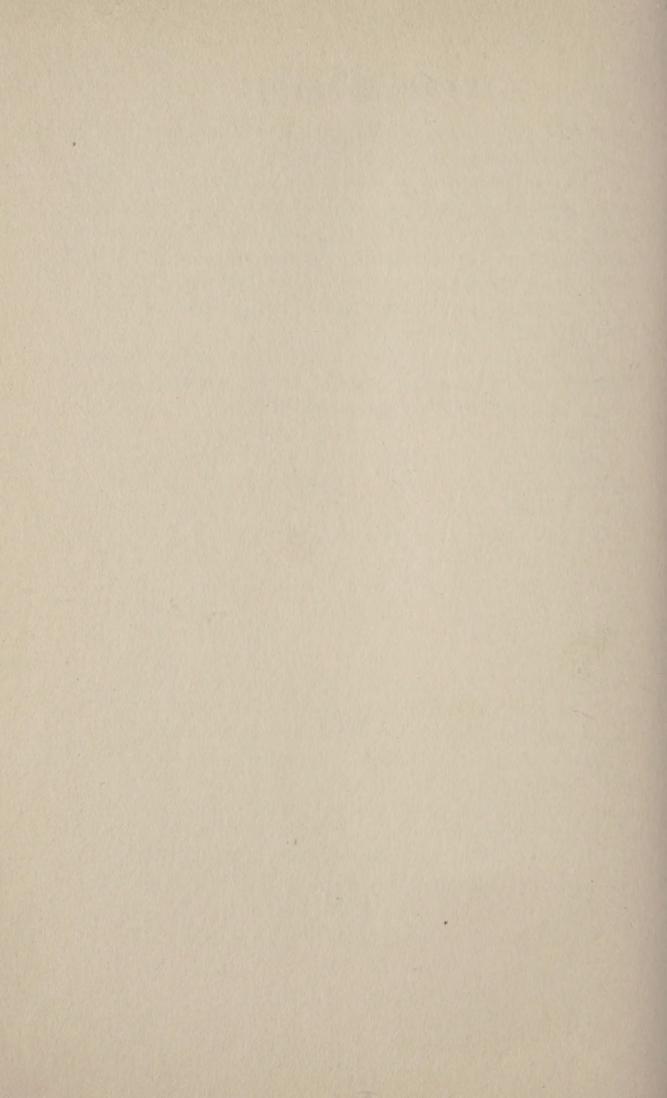
One day, while watching the ray of light high on the wall, it occurred to him that he might see it better if he was a little higher. He rolled a large stone to the place, and standing on this, saw the light much clearer, and, best of all, saw that it was possible to build a way to the foot of the stairway. He began his work at once, carrying stones and placing them one upon another. With work to do, the time passed swiftly. He planned his work in regular order: Catch his food early in the morning, then send a message down the stream, build on his

pyramid till near nightfall, send another note, eat

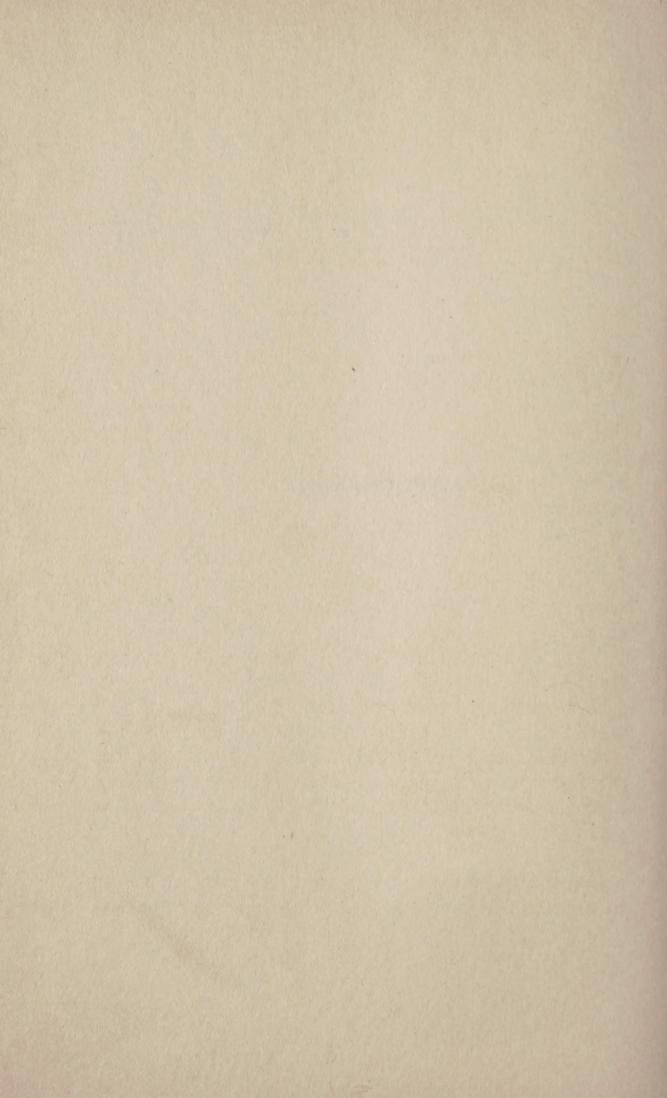
his supper and lie down to sleep.

Slowly the pyramid reared its head until within ten days after awaking in the cave, Jean reached the foot of the stone stairway and climbed into the dim light of the pit again. He at once began the building of a causeway up the wall of the pit. It was a terrible task, but light, liberty and life was the reward for success.

Each day found the clumsy stairway a stone nearer the top, and each night and morning a message of hope was cast upon the stream.



THE ATTACK



CHAPTER XXX

THE ATTACK

NE afternoon in early fall Bert Hawley, accompanied by his wife and little babe, came for an all-night visit with their neighbors, the Mings. Bert's rugged face shone with pleasure as he held the infant prototype of himself out in his long arms for its inspection by his friends, saying:

"How's that for a fine baby, Chris?"

"She's a fine-looking girl. Does she cry much?"

"Couldn't pull a squall out of her with a corkscrew. She's a regular little angel. Isn't she, Cora?"

"Yes; I think she's the sweetest child in all the

Bald-knob country."

The visitors and family had finished supper and were sitting near the small fire in the open fire-place discussing recent events, and among them the disappearance of Jean Carroll. Mollie, with some of the roses gone from her cheeks, was holding and petting the Hawley baby.

"Bert," said Chris, "I believe something has happened to Jean Carroll. He's not the kind of a man to abandon a bad job, and I know he never killed

that stranger. It looks suspicious, the way some I

know keep trying to throw that onto him."

"That's just what I think, Chris. At first, I thought he'd gone away on one of his long, still hunts, but he's been gone too long. It's three weeks since he left. We ought to get out a party and search for him."

"That's what we ought to do, for I believe he's been killed; and, if he isn't found in some way, the Independent ticket will be beaten. He started the move, and the other fellows are claiming now that his talk about the stranger being killed was done to cover his tracks. A search ought to be made for him, but I hate to lead it, for the Bald-knobbers are trying to get some excuse to punish me, and that might give them a chance. I say the Bald-knobbers; I mean Bud Jones. He is determined to pick a quarrel with me; he insults me every time we meet. Some one killed Jim Lacy's old horse, and I understand he's charging me with it. I believe he killed it himself that he might have something to accuse me of. I know I have not wronged any one, and rest at that."

"Bud Jones doesn't wait for one to do a wrong," Bert spoke up. "If he wishes to injure them, he hunts for an excuse and rants about that. He's getting awfully overbearing lately. He's worse, they say, since Jean's gone. I believe he was afraid of Jean."

"Yes; and well he might be. Jean is kind when he's in a good humor, but he gets wild when his

Indian blood is up."

"I wish he was here, so I could see his cheery

face; it always made me feel better."

"I wish he was here, too," Mollie quickly added, "for Ula Dean is coming home to-day, and I won't know what to tell her when she asks me where Jean is. Ula didn't believe that Jean was gone when she heard it."

"We have neglected a duty to a neighbor," said Chris Ming, after a moment's silence; "but, as I

said, I didn't feel like taking the lead."

"I'll tell you what we should do, Chris. We should organize a searching party to-morrow, and see if we can learn anything about where Jean is. Let Bud Jones do what he will; we'll give him no excuse to harm you. I'll gather up the party."

"All right, Bert; I'll go as one, and we'll see if we can find any evidence of foul play. I know of something I could tell that looks suspicious. I perhaps ought to have told some of you before, but I thought it would only hasten trouble onto me without doing any good."

"Do you think the Bald-knobbers want to punish

you, Chris?"

"Yes: I know some of them want to punish me if they can only find an excuse. I look for them to call on me at any time and when they do they will find me ready. You see that gun behind the curtain? That's a thirty-eight Winchester. It's long barreled and carries twenty rounds. I don't want trouble, but I won't stand for being whipped and beaten up before my family. I was a member of the clan for a long time, but I didn't punish any

one that didn't deserve it, and I'm not going to be punished without a fight."

"You don't expect to fight the whole band single

handed, do you, Chris?"

"Yes; I expect to fight any one that I must to defend my home."

"But think, Chris; what if you should be killed?

Think of your family."

"Yes; I want him to think of mamma and me," Mollie again interrupted; "and I know he will think he would rather we all died together than to suffer the shame of having daddy whipped as a criminal."

Chris looked lovingly toward his daughter as he said: "I hope they won't come, but if they do come,

I want them to stay outside."

"Well, Chris, if you use that Winchester, I don't think you need be afraid. They certainly would respect it. I know if I——"

"Hello! Hello!" came in sharp tones from the gate. Chris turned toward the gun; he knew the

call—the Bald-knobbers had come.

Bert started for the door, Chris, gun in hand, following him. Bert motioned Chris back and opened the door.

"Hello!" he called.

"Who's there?" came in gruff tones.

"This is Bert Hawley. What will you have?"

"Oh, you're Hawley, who's been so outspoken against the Bald-knobbers, are you? Well, Mr. Hawley, we are looking for Chris Ming, and we want Chris Ming, and you'd better send him out



The left hand reached over and caught the rope and then the broad shoulders slowly rose above the jet.

(Jean Carroll.)—P. 332.

quick, or we'll take you in his stead. Now move

along."

"I'll move as I please," Bert retorted hotly, "and you can take me if you like, but you will find you've got something you didn't want when you get me."

"We will, eh? Bring him out, boys."

"No, you don't," came in a commanding voice, and Chris Ming appeared behind the level barrel of

the big rifle.

The Bald-knobbers were looking for this, and quickly stooped behind the rail fence. Then the leader gave the order to fire. There was a blaze along the fence, followed by screams from the house. In the midst of the turmoil the riders mounted their horses and galloped away. At the moment the smoke cleared, Chris' rifle cracked again and again, and one of the men fell from his horse. The others escaped, leaving their comrade on the ground.

When Chris turned from the door he found Bert Hawley lying on the floor with blood pouring from a wound in his shoulder. His wife was holding his

head and trying to stop the flow.

On the floor near the fireplace lay Mollie, an ugly wound in her right side, while she held in her arms the Hawley baby, dead, with a bullet through its poor, little head. Mollie was unconscious, but alive.

Bert was placed on one of the beds and Mollie on another, and Chris hurried to the McFaddens to

get help and send for a doctor.

One of the boys quickly mounted his swiftest horse and rode away to town.

When Chris returned to his home he found a number of the neighbors, who had heard the rapid shooting, had gathered in. One of them had discovered Jim Harvey, badly wounded and unconscious, lying near the gate. They had carried him into the yard, but not into the house.

"What must we do with him, Chris?" asked

Frank Jackson.

"Bring him into the house and treat him as well as you can. He was not as much to blame as the one who told him to shoot."

The wounded were cared for and made as comfortable as possible, awaiting the arrival of the doctor.

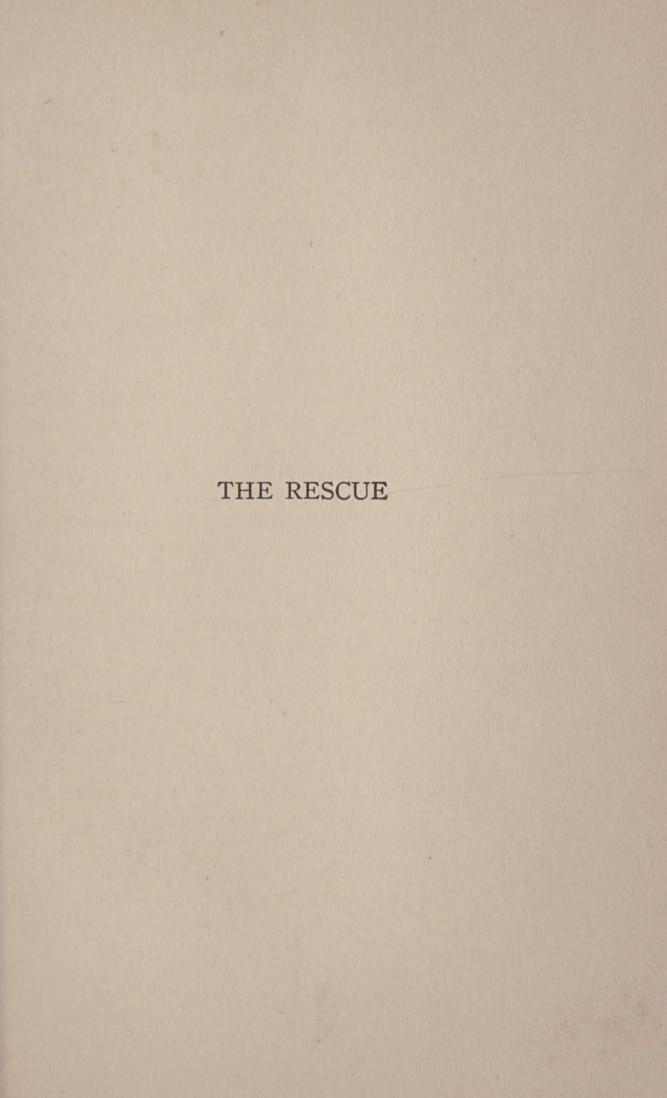
The Bald-knobber, after his wound was washed and dressed, regained consciousness. As soon as he was told where he was and what had happened,

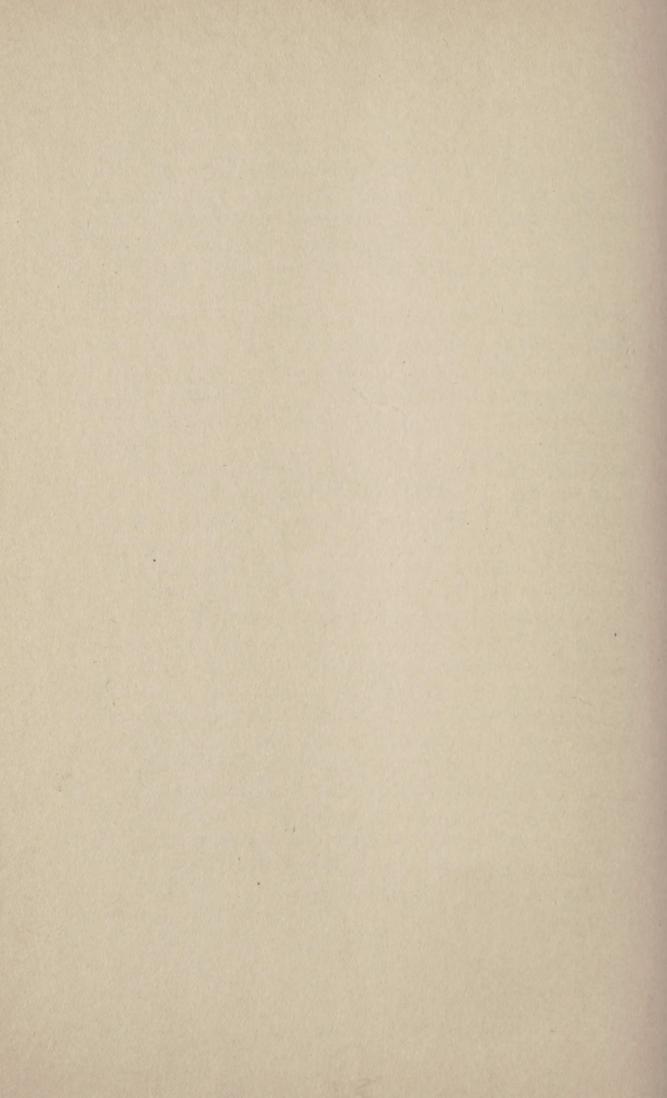
he called for Chris to come to his bedside.

"Chris, I'm done for," he said weakly, "but before I go I want to tell you that I did not intend to harm you or yours. Bud Jones was the cause of all this. He said you needed scaring to keep you from telling about that money business. He said we must use blank cartridges, and he put them in our guns himself. He tricked us to get us to shoot you. You escaped, but we've injured Bert and your daughter, and killed that poor, innocent child."

At the request of some of those present Jim made a statement of who composed the crowd and signed it. He continued to lament over what had hap-

pened until he was soon in a raging fever.





CHAPTER XXXI

THE RESCUE

LA DEAN returned alone to the Ozark country after three weeks at the old Virginia home. Grandfather Dean had passed away. Her parents remained a few days longer to assist in arranging for the care of the estate, and Ula was only too glad to gain her father's consent for her to return to the Western home—a home she had only to leave for a short time to find out how well she loved. She had promised her parents that she would persuade Mollie Ming to stay with her until they arrived, and, with good-bys to her Virginia relatives, she left for home.

Ula arrived in Springfield on a bright, sunshiny morning. All the world seemed glad, as, seated in the stage coach, she rode through the lanes between the ripening cornfields and across the sparkling James and Finley Creek, then through the pine for-

ests to her home.

It was nightfall when she reached the farm, and the moon had just risen over the hill above the spring. The quail was whistling his evening call to his mate down the valley, and the pines were whispering a song of home. Tom and May met her at the gate. Supper was waiting. She ate

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heartily, and, learning that Martin Rogers was away for the night at the county seat, hurried to her room to rest.

She closed the door and went to the window, and sat as she had that night before. The moon was climbing the eastern heavens, and, as she looked upon the moonlit forest, in her imagination, she could see the muscular form and the strong face of Jean Carroll by the roadside. She shuddered as she again went over that former vision, and, as she looked to assure herself it was not there again, she heard a volley of gun shots followed by the steady bang! bang! bang! of a rapidly fired gun. She closed the window and crept to bed, a nameless dread upon her. A few moments later she heard a number of horsemen ride rapidly down the road.

With a sense of trouble around her, Ula was up early the next morning and, taking a pitcher, went to the spring for a drink of the sweet spring water. She longed to hear about Jean Carroll, but could

find no excuse to ask May about him.

The walk to the spring revived her spirits; the dread of the night was passing and a feeling of hope was crowding out the thoughts of impending trouble. The dew was glistening in the bright sunshine, and the song birds were gathered in the hawthorns as if it were springtime.

Ula seated herself on the stone steps by the pool and watched the little fishes as they darted here and there, nibbling at everything that promised food. A small white object shot into the pool with the rushing water. At first it appeared like a bub-

ble, but when it reached stiller water the fishes, one after another, darted at it, then turned away disappointed. As she idly watched it, the object floated to the bank almost at her feet.

"Why, it's paper," she said aloud, and, out of idle curiosity she dipped it out with the pitcher and unfolded it. It was half a leaf from a small Bible. She turned it over. There was writing across the page, dim but legible. She held it closer. There was a name at the bottom. She began to spell it out, "J-e-a— Oh, it's Jean Carroll!" Her head swam and her eyes blurred. Was it a message from the grave? She carefully smoothed the little sheet and read, as the paper dried rapidly in the sun: "Am in Dead Man's cave on the Dean farm. Please help me out." Then followed the name. What could it mean?

Suddenly the truth flashed upon her. The spring stream came through the cave and Jean was there. She dropped the pitcher, slipped the message into her bosom and hurried toward the house, crying to May as she came in sight:

"May, where's Tom?"

"He's gone over to Chris Ming's. Something's wrong over there. Why, Miss Ula, what's the matter? You're all of a-tremble."

"I can't tell you now, May. If Martin or Tom comes before I am back, tell them to come to the Dead Man's cave. There's a man in there starving."

"Oh, Miss Ula! How do you know there's a man starving in the cave? Maybe it's a robber."

Ula did not hear. She rushed into the barn, past May, who was standing in the doorway with a milk pail on her arm, and, taking up a lariat rope, ran down the path and over the hill toward the cave.

May stood gasping in astonishment at Ula's actions, then overcome by the exciting events of the

morning, sat down and began to cry.

When Ula reached the great pit in the midst of the dense thicket, her heart failed her. She peered cautiously over the edge into the dark depths of the hole. She could see nothing. What must she do? Must she call? Yes. And in a tremulous voice she hallooed: "Oh, Mr. Carroll!"

There was no answer. What if I am too late? she thought. He may be dying; perhaps is dead, and she powerless to help him. She almost wished to jump into the cave and die by his side. Her fear lent strength to her voice, and she called again: "Oh, Mr. Carroll!" There was no reply. Then louder: "Oh, Mr. Carroll!" And then, in desperation, she cried into the cave: "Oh, Jean! Don't you hear me?" There was a moment's silence, then from the depths of the cave came the reply: "Yes; I'm coming."

The answer so startled the excited girl that she almost lost her balance. Then came the voice again, sounding strangely from the echoing walls: "Don't

leave me. I'm coming."

Again came the voice, now much plainer: "Are

you still there? Can you help me out?"

"Yes, Jean, I'm here. I won't leave you. I have a long rope; what must I do with it?"

"Tie one end to a tree and drop the other down here. Will it reach me?"

The last part of the sentence was lost; the girl had regained her composure and was making one end fast to a white oak sapling on the cave's brink.

"Now, Jean," Ula called down the pit, "this end is fast and I'm letting the other down to you, but

I can't see you. Can you see the rope?"

"No, not yet; but let it come on. Now I see it; here it is. Now, if I can only climb it. Are you

sure the rope is fast?"

She felt him try the rope, then came the quivering tension as he drew himself up hand-over-hand from the top of his stone ladder twenty feet below.

Jean climbed rapidly at first, but the excitement over his chance of escape had sapped his strength. Halfway up the rope his muscles failed him. Oh, what if he should fall now, with escape so near! It meant certain death to fall back onto the pile of stones he had builded. He hung on the rope almost discouraged, then he felt the old, wild feeling enter his heart and his head. He would not fail. He might hang on the rope and die, but he would not fall so long as life lasted.

"Can I help you, Jean?" asked Ula, leaning perilously over the brink, her heart standing still as

she thought of the climber's danger.

"No; I'm coming. I only stopped to rest," and the climbing commenced again. Not so fast this time, but much steadier. Up he came, inch by inch, inch by inch.

Ula, peering into the darkness, could see the bulk

of the man, now the outline, now she could see he was bareheaded, now the naked, roughened arms with every muscle tense. He reached the top, and, blinded by the light, reached over the brink with his right hand to catch the rope beyond the rim. He could not find it. Ula saw his struggle, grasped a bush with her left hand and placed her small right hand in his great palm, and, with hands clasped, pulled with all her might. His left hand reached over and caught the rope, and then the broad shoulders slowly rose above the pit. Another instant and he was safe from the cave.

He lay stretched upon the ground, his head on his arm, faint from the unaccustomed heat from the

sun and the strain he had just passed through.

Ula thought he had fainted, and forgetting all else dropped down beside the prostrate man and lifted his head in her arms, pushed back the tangled hair from his forehead, and gently passed her soft hand over his face.

"Oh, Jean, you're not going to die now that I've found you? Speak to me, Jean. Do speak to me," pleaded the frightened girl, all the while bending

over him and chafing his face and temples.

Slowly Jean realized where he was. He felt Ula's sweet breath fan his cheek, and he opened his eyes to meet the same soft blue eyes that had met his after the plunge through the fire, but the kiss did not follow. Ula, seeing that he was recovering, laid his head gently on the soft ground, and busied herself gathering up the rope from the pit.

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Recovered from the effects of his climb, and his eyes accustomed to the bright sunlight, Jean rose to his feet. He made a strange appearance. The rough work of carrying stones and climbing up the uneven incline for days and days, had worn to threads his clothing. His great muscular arms and chest were bare, and his shoes were almost torn from his feet. Except for the expression, which had resumed its kind tone, he looked the wild man that he had sometimes seemed.

With a gentle hand of authority he took the rope from Ula, saying: "Miss Dean, how can I thank you for saving me? How did you find me, and

how can I pay you for what you have done?"

"You have already paid me for what I've done. You saved the life of my little cousin at the fire, at the risk of your own life. Have you forgotten that?"

"Yes; almost forgotten the fire, but not my reward for what I did."

Ula blushed and turned her head away, not because of the kiss of long ago, but because of what

she almost did just now.

"This is how I found you," and she took the crumpled paper from her bosom. Then the well-dressed girl, standing there in the forest, beside the man more ragged than any tramp, told the story of her vision in the night, of the hurried call to Virginia, and her return to find the note in the spring.

"How have you lived in the dreadful cave all this

time?" she asked.

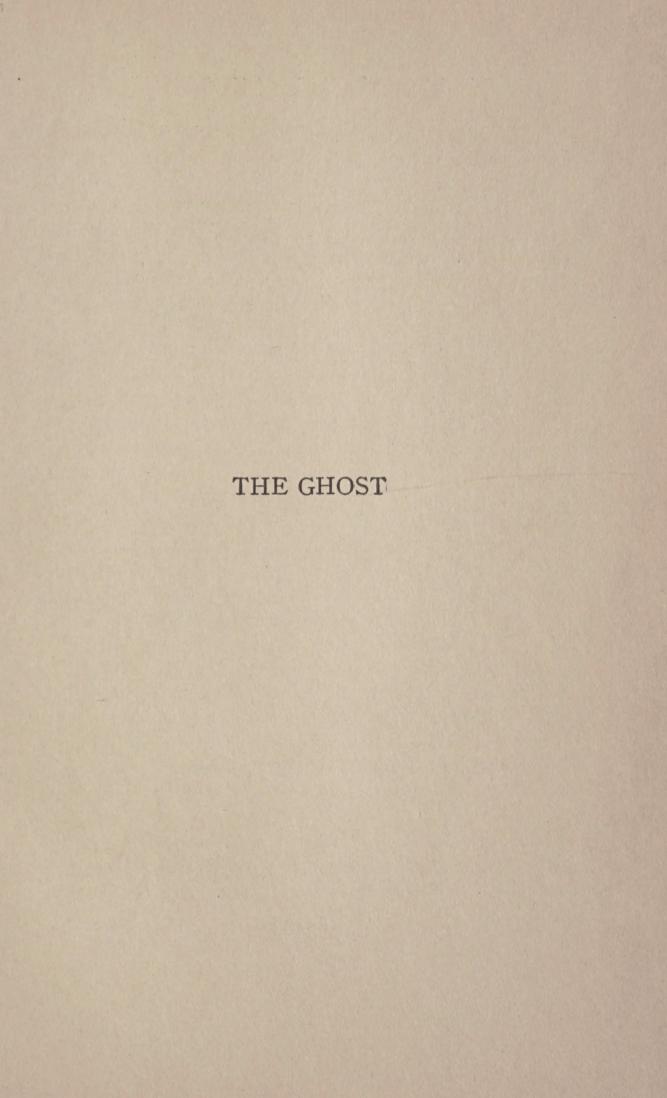
"The story is too long to tell now, Miss Dean. I've lived as my savage ancestors did before me—from Nature's storehouse."

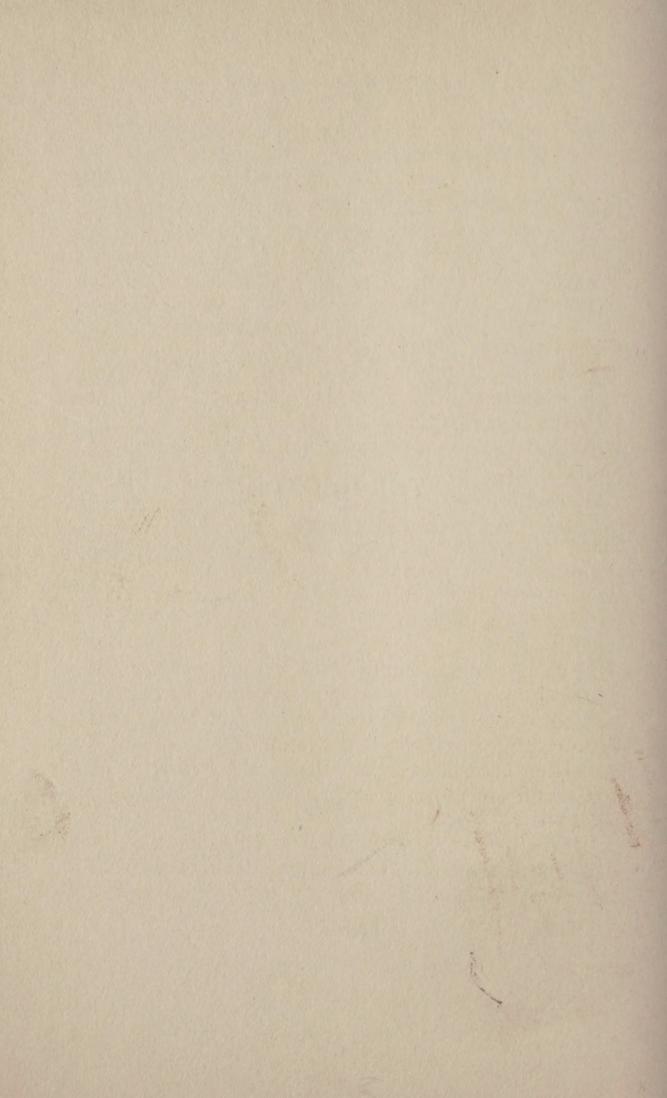
At the thought of what trouble his enemies had caused, Jean's face hardened, and, turning, he led the way out of the thicket and through the pine forest to the Dean gate, he leading the way and parting the undergrowth, she following, like some Indian maiden following her chieftain lover.

At the gate Jean said: "Miss Dean, I need to go home. I thank you more than I can express for what you have done. If ever, at any time, I can

help you, speak; I won't forget. Good-by."

Ula knew his mood and respected it. She answered: "Good-by," and watched the bare-headed, ragged form, as it stalked, like a shadow, off through the pines. With a lighter heart than she had known in weeks she went into the house.





CHAPTER XXXII

THE GHOST

HE day following the one on which the Deans started for Virginia M started for Virginia, Martin Rogers returned from gathering up the scattered cattle. He took his horse to the barn and went directly to his room to rest. A few moments later May rapped at the door.

"Come in, May. What is it?"

"I just wanted to tell you, Mr. Rogers, that Mrs. Dean told me to look after the house while she was gone, and so I thought I'd tell you that if you wanted anything done while she was away, such as 'riddin' up,' you just tell me what it is."
"All right, May; thank you. I'll do so."

"I've just been cleaning your room up a bit while you've been gone. It was in an awful clutter. I burned a whole ash-bucket full of scrap paper that I found on your desk and around. Say, if you'll leave that cabinet unlocked I'll clean up all that old grass and weeds in there. They've all lost their bloom."

"I don't want them burned," said Martin, as he thought of the damage she might have done to his collection, if he had carelessly left the door un-

locked. "Those are specimens I have collected, and I do not wish to lose them. Please don't bother about my room again unless I ask you."

"Oh, it's no trouble, Mr. Martin; I just love to

clean up and tidy up a room."

"Yes; but, May, I might have something here that you would think useless that I would want to

keep."

"All right, Mr. Rogers, if you'd rather have it cluttered up. But I've got away with some of the scraps, anyway," and May left the room, not knowing whether to be angry or not.

Martin found upon investigation that several letters that he had expected to file away had been de-

stroyed by his overzealous housekeeper.

It seemed a long time to Martin before the Deans returned. He had heard nothing of Mollie and knew not what to think of her action. He had gone to call on Jean Carroll, but he was not at home, and the farm hands knew nothing of his whereabouts. He was bothered over the reports that were being freely circulated that Jean had run away for fear of being arrested for killing the stranger.

Everything seemed to go wrong, and the time would have been almost unendurable, had it not been that the extra work that the absence of Mr. Dean imposed upon him, kept his mind employed. Two weeks had passed when he received word that Ula would be at home at the end of another week, but business called him to the county seat and he

was not at home when she returned.

May had completed her cry and gone about her housework before Ula, accompanied by Jean, returned from the cave. She was standing in the kitchen door, drying dishes, when she looked up and saw them approaching. She took a second glance and then, with a scream, dropped the dish to the floor, and slammed the door shut. May was a firm believer in ghosts and saw in Jean, with his pale face and tattered clothing, the dead abroad.

When Ula entered the house she found May in the bed, clothing and all, sobbing and moaning, and upon seeing Ula screamed: "Oh, Lord, Ula, don't come close to me. I'm afraid of you; you've been

walking with the dead."

"What do you mean, May? What are you doing

in that bed with your clothes on?"

"Ula, I'm afraid. Wasn't you walking with Jean Carroll's ghost? Oh, Lord, forgive me; I've tried to do right."

"Hush, May; that wasn't Jean's ghost, but Jean himself, as well as ever, and I'm so happy I can

hardly talk. Has Martin returned yet?"

"Honey, forgive me for a poor ignorant woman," said May, as she crawled from the bed; "but I'm so stirred up this morning. Yes, Martin came about an hour ago. I forgot to tell him what you said, and he went right over to Chris Ming's as fast as he could run. Something awful has happened over there."

"What can it be, May? I'm going over there, too."

"Not alone, Miss Ula, and leave me here? What will I do?"

Ula did not answer, but hurried away.

At the Ming home all was still confusion. The doctor had arrived and pronounced Mollie's wound very dangerous. Bert Hawley would soon recover, but Jim Harvey could live but a few hours.

A large number of the neighbors had gathered to offer their services and sympathy. The yard was full of people discussing the event when Mar-

tin Rogers arrived.

Martin hesitated to enter the room. He had been asked by Mollie not to try to see her, and although his heart was breaking at the news of her suffering, he did not wish to thrust himself into her presence.

He waited with the others, and watched for Chris Ming that he might ask his permission to go to Mollie's side. Every few minutes news of the suffering girl's condition was brought to the waiting throng. The messages ran: "She seems better." "She talked a little." "She called for water." Then they found she was growing worse. Her temperature was rising and all were in suspense.

Bert Hawley was placed on a bed and carried to the wagon, and, with his weeping wife, and child, cold in death, they took their way to the cemetery on the green hillside, where the remains of their beloved infant, their first-born, were to be laid to rest. Many of the neighbors followed the funeral proces-

sion to the cemetery.

When these were gone Martin could bear the [350]

strain no longer, and went in search of Chris Ming

to beg permission to go to Mollie's side.

At this moment Minnie McFadden came from the room almost crying. A neighbor asked how Mollie rested.

"Not very well now, poor thing," she answered as the tears began to flow. "She's talking wild and calling for-" Then seeing Martin standing near she continued: "She's calling for different ones."

Martin started forward, then stopped. Had he any right to go without permission. Was there some good reason why he should not see her? No one had invited him to go in. He turned away toward the gate. There he met Ula, out of breath from the run from her home.

The sight of the gathered crowd frightened her until she could hardly speak. She ran up to Martin

and gasped: "What is it, Martin? Tell me."

At last the tears came and the man broke down. "Oh, Ula, Mollie's been shot and they fear she's dving."

"Oh, Martin! Dear Mollie; let's go to her. Why

are you not there?"

"You know why, Ula. I want to go; but she

wrote me not to see her. What must I do?"

"Why, Martin, she asked you to come back. She wrote a note and I laid it on your table the day I left."

"No, Ula, no. Was I to come? Tell me, Ula,

quick!"

"Yes, Martin; you were to come. Let's go to her -you and I."

Together they hurried into the room. All stood aside to let them pass. These men of the woods, though they did not know all, understood. There was a change in Martin Rogers, and they respected him for what he was doing.

Mollie lay moaning and muttering, her face flushed with fever. She turned to the wall and muttered: "Why did I do it? Why did I? He hates me now and never will come back. Oh, Martin,

don't blame me; it wasn't my fault."

Martin Rogers dropped on his knees by the restless girl's bedside, and taking her feverish hand in his said softly: "No, I know you didn't mean it, little sweetheart, so I've come. Do you hear? Mollie, I've come, and I'll not leave you. Do you understand?"

She closed her eyes that a moment before had been staring wide without seeing. Martin continued: "I've come, Mollie, love. Martin's come. Do you hear? Ula and I have come."

Mollie raised her free hand to her head, then

opened her eyes. "Am I dreaming, mother?"

"No, darling, you are not dreaming. I'm here,"

and Martin, rising, leaned over the bed.

"Yes, Martin, you've come," she weakly murmured; "I understand. You're not mad now, are you?"

"No; and never was mad at you, darling."

"I'm tired now. I want to go to sleep," the sick girl murmured; and holding Martin's hand, while Ula stroked the fevered face, she fell into a quiet sleep, the first since the shooting.

When she had released Martin's hand in sleep he at once went to Chris Ming, saying: "Mr. Ming, there has been a great mistake; Mollie and I have not understood each other. I thought she did not want me to come, while she had written me a note which I had never received. I ask you to pardon my actions for the past month. I remained away from your home and Mollie because I thought I was not welcome."

"It is all right, Martin," Chris replied. "I am the one that was to blame; but I did what I thought was best. I'm glad you are here, and glad that my little girl loves so honorable a man, and that you love her. She's worthy of it. She's good; good as gold, and she loves you well. She never told me but once, but I could see it all the time. Here's my hand as a friend, and you're always welcome to my house."

Martin took the hand, then went and listened to Ula, as she told him of her last visit to Mollie and the contents of the destroyed note. Then she told him and the neighbors about Jean's escape from the

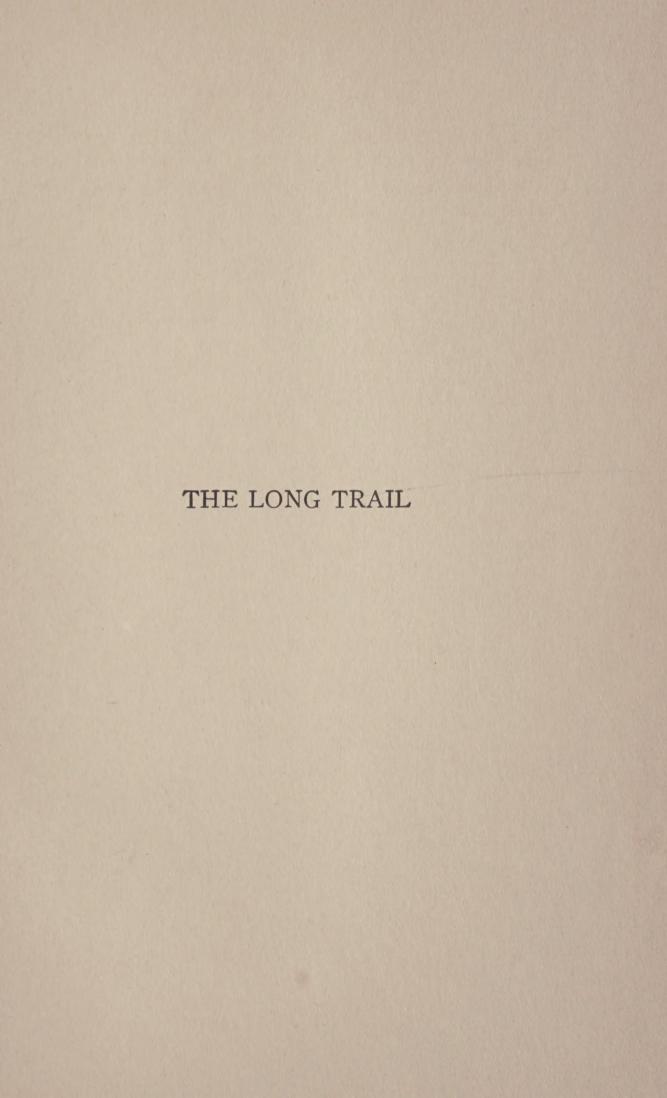
cave.

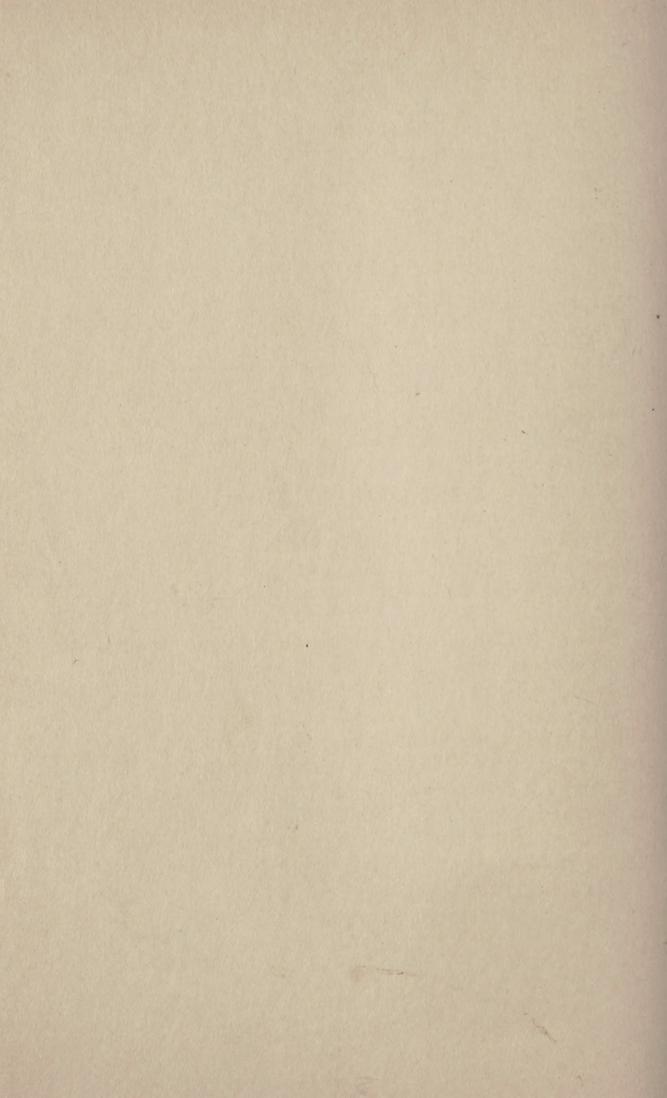
"Then he didn't kill the stranger, as was told?" said one of the listeners.

Ula turned on him with almost anger. "Have they told that Jean killed the stranger? I know he did not, for I saw him standing with his scythe in the lower meadow when the shot was fired. Bud Jones—"

But at that instant Jean Carroll came stalking from the woods. Martin started to meet him, but

stopped when he saw his face. Over the pallor caused by the darkness of the cave was spread the mask of a savage. It was Jean Carroll's body possessed of a wild spirit.





CHAPTER XXXIII

THE LONG TRAIL

REAT was the surprise and joy of Ben and his wife when Jean arrived at the farm. They could scarcely believe their eyes when he walked up to the door with his tattered clothing, just as he had left the cave. They had believed he must be dead, to stay away so long without writing, and could hardly accept his coming as he did. Ben asked him a dozen questions without waiting for an answer to one.

"I'll tell you all about it soon, Ben. I'm too glad to see you and the farm all right to talk more now. Get me some breakfast and some clean clothes, Lizzie."

When Jean had eaten his breakfast and donned clean clothes he walked out to the barn to have a look at the horses. Ben followed, relating the happenings on the farm since his leaving it. "Jean, did you hear about the law-enforcement meeting before you left? They nominated a full ticket, and it's running like a scared wolf. Frank Jackson was nominated for sheriff. When he's elected, he'll put a stop to Bud Jones' deviltry. You know about them shooting Bert Hawley and Mollie Ming."

"No, Ben, when was it?"

"Why, just last night. Bert and Mollie are both bad hurt, and Bert's little baby was killed. Chris Ming fired on them as they left and hit Jim Harvey— Why, what's the matter, Jean?" But Jean did not answer. He turned away from Ben and walked to the house where he buckled on his old hunting revolver. He then took down his big Winchester and, with "Care for the farm, Ben, till I come," passed out the gate and into the woods.

He made his way straight for the Ming home, turning neither for forest, fence or stream. When he reached the gate he saw the crowds gathered about only as in a dream. He wondered why they all moved out of his way, and did not speak as usual; but he did not care, he had but one object in view—to find and punish the man who had wounded

his friends.

He walked into the room where Mollie lay, flushed with a terrible fever. He stopped, and his expression softened as he looked at her burning face. Then he turned to the room where Jim Harvey lay propped up upon a pillow. Jim paled as

Jean entered the room.

"Who did that, Jim?" Jean asked, as he pointed to where Mollie lay. There was no question in his voice—it was a command. Harvey had been told by his friends that Jean was dead, and his face showed relief when he found Jean was not a spirit. But when he looked again and saw the hard lines of the face, with the glistening eyes, he hastened to give the names of the men that were with him.

For an awful instant Jean's eyes burned into the

very soul of the wounded man. They saw the truth there, and without another word he left the room and turned away toward the graveyard, where the funeral of the little murdered babe was in progress. When he arrived there the friends were taking a last look at the innocent dead. A long line of friends and neighbors were slowly passing by the little coffin.

At the approach of Jean, armed as a soldier, the column stopped. There was a breathless silence as the savage-looking man moved up to the vacant side of the coffin. He looked long and sorrowfully into the pale little face, then muttered between his teeth: "Yes, Bert, I'll bring him back. Little one, I'll

bring the coward back."

Without another word, or a glance at the many friends about him, he left the coffin and started away toward the east. All knew where he was going. Sam Miller and Frank Jackson hurried after him, and asked if they might not help him. He answered: "No, I go alone." He crossed the cemetery and the forest claimed its own. The unconquerable Watumska once more lived.

Jean set his course to the east and kept to the woods. He instinctively knew where his man had gone. To a coward like Bud Jones no place would seem so safe as the great Irish Wilderness, and

into this Jean followed him.

He learned on the way that a bunch of men, then three, then two, then one man had passed, traveling toward the east, and he followed on unerringly and unswervingly.

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On the second day out, he walked into the little village of Koshkonong, a station on the new railroad. Here he ate for the first time. Bud had passed through there the day before, going directly east into the unbroken pine forest. Jean took up his trail as it followed a log road, then swerved into the grass of the forest, and traveled for miles and miles. The trail was heading for the almost impassable breaks of the Eleven Point River. Before night a single camp spot was found. A rabbit had been dressed and cooked on a pine-knot fire. The rider had slept on a bed of grass close by his tethered horse.

All the next day he followed the trail silent and alert, with rifle always ready, watching for the least sign of the fugitive. Early in the afternoon another camp fire was found. Jean was gaining on his man; Bud Jones was less than a day ahead.

The trail was nearing the centre of the big forest. There was game in abundance. Deer were seen frequently, watching him as he quietly made his way among the great pines, and there were turkeys seemingly everywhere. Jean had traveled from the railroad without food, and it was now necessary to kill some game.

To kill a deer or turkey with the gun would have been an easy task, but he could not risk the report of his gun. Supper must be secured without noise, for Bud might stop now in any one of the near-by protected ravines. He must take some game, and, like his ancestors, must take it without gun or dog.

He left the trail and started down a small ravine,

watching for what he might see. A covey of quail ran away into the underbrush. Here was his chance for supper, and with the patience of a savage he watched the birds go to roost under a bunch of grass, and with many a peep, peep, settle themselves for the night. A half hour later one could have seen, but not heard, a man creeping, creeping, on hands and knees, on and on, toward the covey of birds. One false step, one rustling leaf, or one broken twig, meant failure. No false step was made; no leaf was moved; no twig was broken. The hunter, except for his dress, seemed a savage in his native woods. And a savage he was; all the culture of his civilized ancestors was for the time forgotten. The savage nature ruled supreme, and with the savage nature had come the cunning of the savage. The birds were caught as they nestled in the grass, and by the brook, without cooking or salt, they were eaten. Not a reasonable meal, but sufficient to make up for the two days' fast and provide for two days to come. Watumska was having his day.

An hour later, without fire or bedding, Jean was

fast asleep in the shelter of a large log.

The trail was again taken up at daybreak, and at two o'clock had struck Buck Creek and was following down its rocky bed. Two hours later, far ahead, grazing on the hillside, a lariated horse was seen. Jean crept up close and sat down in the shelter of a big rock. The race was finished. Bud Jones must answer for his crimes.

At dusk Jean crept down to the grazing animal, [361]

untied him, led him a ways along the back trail, and turned him loose, retaining only the halter strap. The horse struck up the trail toward home. Jean then returned to the place where the horse had been tied, well knowing that sooner or later the rider would come to look for his mount.

All night he waited there, then crept farther away and began the wait for day. About ten o'clock Bud Jones came striding up the valley, gun in hand, looking for the lariated animal. He passed within fifty yards of his pursuer and stopped, trying to locate the hitching place. Jean could have sent a bullet through his brain, but that was not enough, his victim must know and suffer.

Bud located the place where the horse had been, and cursed loudly when he found him gone. "Well," he said, after his passion had cooled, "I don't need him, anyway. I'll just stay around here till our little skirmish blows over, then I'll go back and reorganize our crowd and show some of them what I can do. I hope Jim Harvey is killed dead. It would be awkward having him give us all away," and the Bald-knobber leader strode on down the valley. He did not know that a crouching man, like a panther, was following his every motion, dodging from tree to tree through the forest.

Bud followed the stream about a mile, then turned up a leaping spring branch that ran in from the south of the creek. A few rods up the hillside this stream burst out from under a ledge of stone. To the left of the stream was a low opening under the ledge. Bud stooped down upon hands and

knees and crept into the opening and disappeared from view.

Jean watched the cave the remainder of the day. Once Bud came out. He gathered an armload of pine knots and took them back with him. For hours Jean watched the cave, then crept up to the ledge and passed into the opening. All was dark at first, but he was not to be stopped, and, with his revolver in his hand, he crawled in inch by inch. He rounded a corner and a streak of light came into view, farther on there was a broad glare of light. There was a large cave before him, made perfectly light by the pine-knot fire in the centre.

On the west side, opposite the entrance, on an elevated portion, lay Bud Jones sound asleep in his

supposed security.

Jean carefully examined the cave from his view-point, and as he witnessed its natural beauties, as reflected by the firelight, the lines of his face soft-ened. The opening was thirty or forty feet across, and about ten feet high. Beautiful stone formations hung from the ceiling and walls, while near the farther side a great stone column had been formed by the dripping water, as symmetrical as if it had been cut by a sculptor's chisel. Through the centre of the cave flowed the stream that formed the spring outside. Jean took in all these beauties of the cave at a glance.

He stood erect, viewed the cave over until his eyes rested on the big, heavy face of Bud Jones. All the softness caused by the beauties of the cave left his face. He stepped to where Bud's guns lay,

picked them up and extracted the cartridges from them. He also slipped the cartridges from his own guns, and laid them all together. Then he walked

over to the sleeper.

For a moment he glared down upon the sleeping form, then slapped his face with his open hand. Bud roused with a start, and was on his feet in an instant, but a warning sign from Jean caused him to stop. Then Jean, in deadly tones, addressed him:

"Bud Jones, I'm going to punish you. You must

answer for your crimes. Are you ready?"

"Jean Carroll, I thought you dead."

"I know you thought me dead, Bud Jones; but I have lived to punish you. Are you ready?"

"Jean, I know I did you wrong, but you surely

are not going to kill an unarmed man?"

"I'm unarmed myself. Defend yourself, for I'm coming," and he sprang at the bully's throat. There was a terrible struggle as man grappled man, each fighting for his life. The struggle ended at last with Bud flat on his back and Jean tying the halter strap around his wrists.

"Now, Bud Jones, I'm going to take you back to where you killed Bert Hawley's innocent baby and

murdered the stranger without cause."

"I didn't kill them."

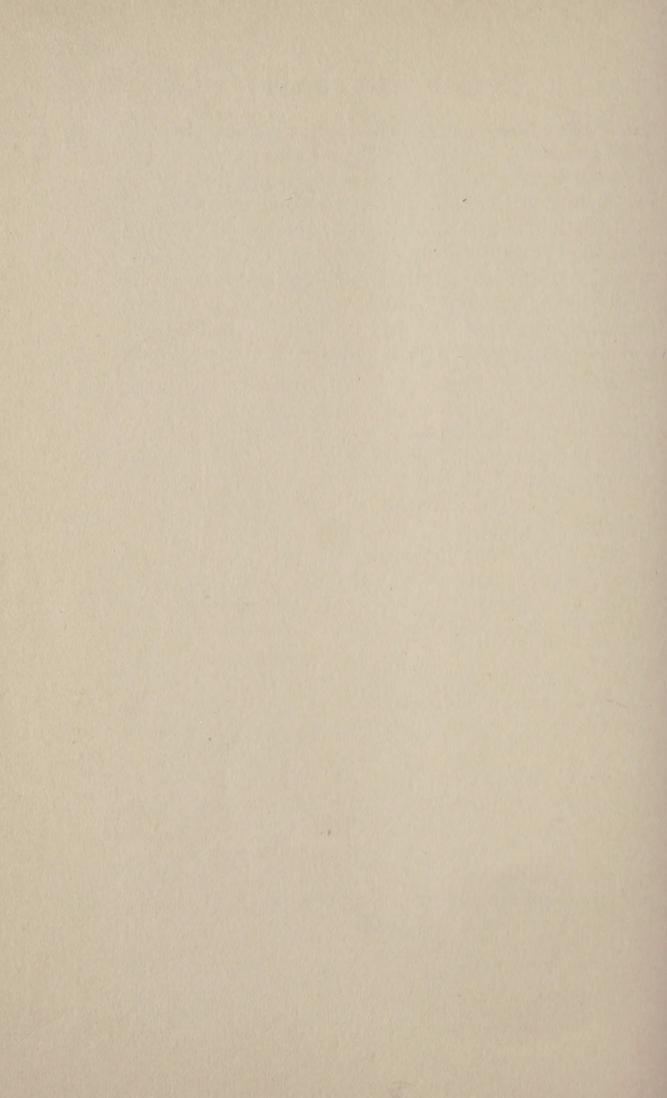
"Yes, you did. No more of that, or you may tempt me to burn your worthless body instead of killing you like a man. Now crawl out that hole."

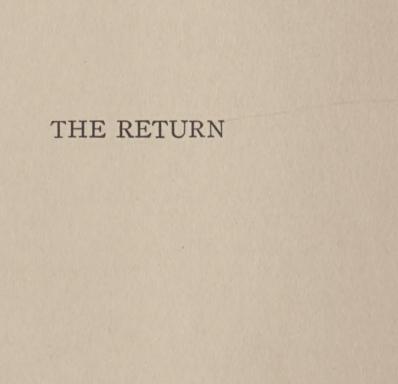
Jean followed the bound man out of the cave, down the hill to the trail, and then began the homeward trip, a journey long remembered by those who

saw them pass—a savage-faced Indian, heavily

armed, leading a prisoner by a halter.

Some began to ask what the prisoner had done, but a look at the captor stopped them, and the two men made the trip unmolested. Neither talked on the way, the captor only asking and paying for their meals, one-half of which he threw to Bud, as he would have thrown it to a captive dog. They did not stop for sleep, but tramped on and on, and, at the end of four days, arrived at the home of Chris Ming.







CHAPTER XXXIV

THE RETURN

THE news of Jean's coming had preceded him home, and friends from far and near gathered and followed them during the last part of the trip. They had traveled night and day without stopping. Bud was almost exhausted, and for miles Jean had driven him before him like an ani-

mal, always with the strap fast about him.

They arrived at the home of Chris Ming late in the afternoon, and beside those who were with Jean, many of the neighbors were there to see the captor and captive return. Ula Dean was there, as she had been most of the time since Jean left. Mollie was now fast improving. Ula, pale and haggard from many anxious days, saw the crowd coming long before it reached the gate, and felt what it meant. Jean's mission was known over the whole countryside.

The crowd came in a straggling mob, with Jean in front, driving Bud before him like a mule. Both men looked worn and weary, but Jean's face had lost none of its wildness; the lips were pressed tightly together and the eyes still sparkled. Bud was overcome with fatigue, shame and fear, and

appeared ready to drop to the ground.

When they reached the gate Jean pulled Bud up before him, and, there in the presence of the noiseless, breathless throng, said: "Bud Jones, for your crimes you are about to die. I am going to kill you—with my own hands I am going to strangle you. Here, where you cruelly murdered one innocent and wounded and tried to kill others, you shall die. Have you anything to say?"

Bud dropped to his knees and, with uplifted hands, begged that he might be tried; begged and entreated that he might be spared; confessed his

crimes and begged again.

"Enough, coward, stand up and die." With one hand Jean jerked Bud to his feet and the other was reaching for his throat when Ula ran up and clasped Jean's arm.

"Oh, Jean, don't do that," she pleaded. "If

you're my friend, don't touch him."

Jean stopped as he stood, one hand on the captive, the other reaching for his throat, and for an instant, while everything grew stiller than the stillness of night, every one waited. They saw Jean's face

clear and the wild look leave his eyes.

"Yes, Ula, I'll stop," he said, turning away. "You've saved the cur's life for a while. Take him, boys, and do what you will with him," and pale and haggard he started to leave, but Ula clung to his trembling hand and led him down toward the spring.

"Won't you go home and rest, Jean? Mollie is much better now, and Bert is up, and all the other

men have surrendered."

"Yes, I'll go home. I'm so tired—so tired." He paused a moment then said: "Miss Dean, I thank you for saving me from that deed." He started away, but stopped. "May I come over to-morrow night?" he stammeringly said. He seemed surprised when Ula answered: "Yes, Jean, be sure and come."

Turning, he left for home, walking stooped and slow, like an old man, while the bystanders knew they had witnessed the old story of a strong man

controlled by a woman's love.

Bud Jones was taken, heavily guarded, to jail to await trial, with his comrades, on a charge of cold-blooded murder.

Jean reached home in a stupor and, without undressing, fell across his bed and slept the night out and far into the afternoon of the next day. Then he arose, bathed and changed his clothes, and left for the Dean home.

When Jean arrived at Ula's home, the day was just putting on the shades of night. The sun had disappeared over the tops of the western hills, but its rays still gilded the tips of the loftiest pines.

Ula, clad in a light, loose-fitting costume, that displayed to the fullest her beautiful suppliant form, was waiting for him on the porch. She seemed happier and more cheerful than usual, in contradistinction to Jean's more sombre mood. Her appearance fitted into the blend of the beautiful things of Nature around her. The whole scene seemed to Jean a symbol of peace and contentment.

After a few commonplace remarks, Jean began: "Miss Dean, I am not worthy of the privilege of

calling on you. Yesterday I was almost a murderer. I was a murderer at heart. I have been weak and failed in my resolves. I have allowed reason to sleep and passion to control. I shouldn't have come to see you. I am not fit to be with, or to live with, refined people. My wild blood has controlled me at every crisis of my life, and I fear will always control me, and for that reason I am going away. I came to you because you have always been so kind to me, and I could not leave without bidding you good-by. I am going to leave to-morrow, so I tell you good-by. I must not stay where I can only injure those who befriend me."

"Oh, Jean, what do you mean? You're not going to leave the farm, your grandfather's old farm?"

"Yes, Miss Dean, I must leave the farm. I'll start to-morrow for the West, and there live alone, where my acts will not shame those I love."

"Oh, Jean, don't say that. What will I do if you leave; you're my best friend."

"Ula, don't talk that way. I'm going, Ula-Oh, I didn't mean to say it, but I must now. I'm going, Ula, because I love you. Love you so well that I cannot bear to see you and know you do not love me. Ula, I love you; have loved you since that day long ago at the fire when you kissed me. I loved you that day, and will always love you. I wanted to go away without hurting you with this; now I must go before I say more. Good-by, little friend."

"Oh, Jean, why need you go? Jean, come back: [372]

don't you understand? I have remembered the fire all the time, and I—— Jean, I don't want you to

go."

Jean stopped and turned back. Were his eyes deceiving him? Could it be so? "Ula, is it so?" he asked, but there was no need of an answer. He clasped her in his great, strong arms and pressed

the golden crowned head to his bosom.

An hour later they stood by the gate, near where the Bald-knobber had struck Jean down. Ula was saying: "And you didn't know, you great, strong man, how I loved you? Didn't I just push myself into your canoe? Why, I've had to throw myself at your head to get you to notice me. I almost believe that I became lost that day that you might find me."

"I don't care what you have done, little sweetheart, just so you love me. All that bothers me, is the fear that I can never be worthy of your love. Don't you hate me when I get one of my wild spells on me? I know I hate myself afterward for my weakness."

"No, I don't hate you, my big Indian," and she tiptoed and placed her arms around his neck. "That's when I love you best; you look so fierce and strong. I love to think of you doing anything, doing everything. A man, my man, strong enough to rule everything—even me!"

"Don't talk that way, darling. You'll make me

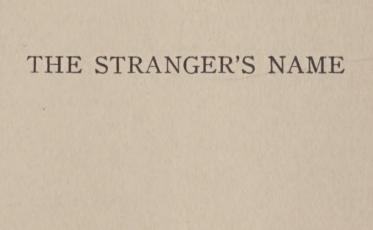
want to go wild, so you will love me more."

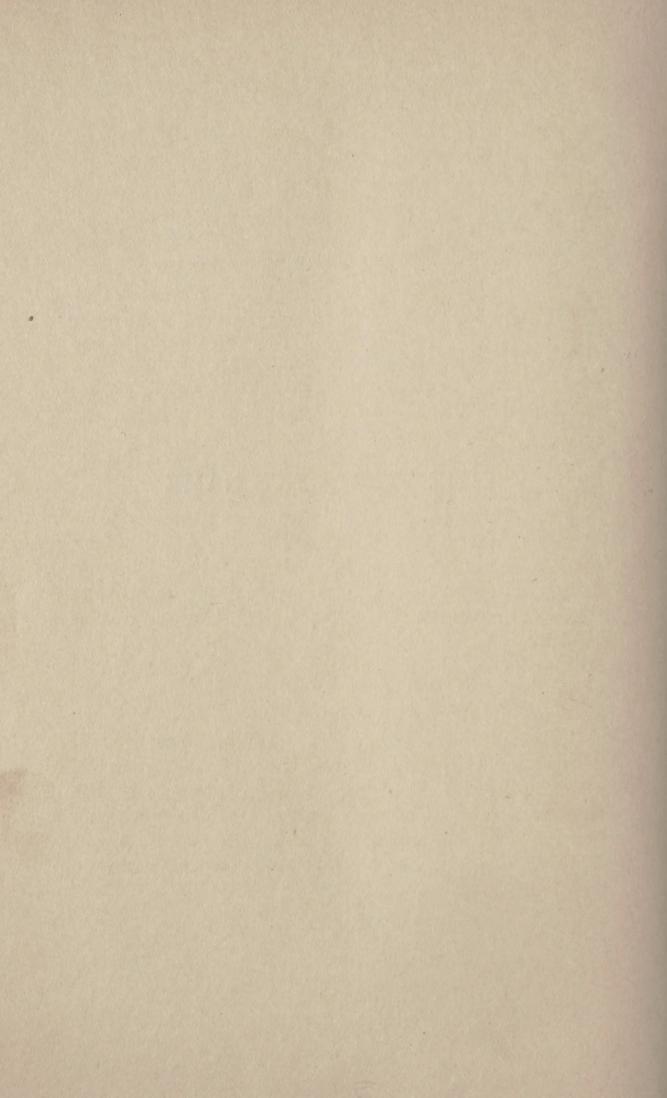
"Oh, Jean, how happy I am now that you love

me, and all the dreadful killing and trouble are over, for, with Bud Jones in prison and good men nomi-

nated for office, our people will live in peace."

Jean stood for a long time looking out over the pines as they gently swayed in the silvery moonlight, then, in a voice that sounded like a prayer of thankfulness, he said: "Oh, my little sweetheart, how good it is to be alive. A week ago I was buried in a living grave. Three days ago life held only the swift passing pleasure of revenge. To-day I have more than all the world besides. It seems too good to be true, that I live to know you love me, and to know that our beautiful land is at last to be at peace with itself and the rest of the world."





CHAPTER XXXV

THE STRANGER'S NAME

THE election was over, and returns coming in showed the election of the "Law and Order" candidates by large majorities. The old officials, seeing their defeat assured, had quit the fight before the contest closed. Bud Jones' capture discouraged his Bald-knob followers, and they hastened to join with the inevitable winners. All these causes made the election almost unanimous.

Jean had attended the election in company with Martin Rogers, returning by the way of the Dean farm. After a short talk with Ula, Jean went on to his home. When he reached the farmhouse, he found a smooth-faced, gray-haired stranger await-

ing him.

"Is this Mr. Jean Carroll?" he asked, upon Jean's arrival.

"Yes, sir, that is my name."

"My name is Gordon. I am looking for a friend who came to this county in the early summer. I received a letter from him in August, but since that time have lost all trace of him. He told me in his letter he was stopping with you."

"Mr. Gordon, are you related to the stranger

that was here?"

"Only in a business way, and as a friend."

"I have bad news to tell you of your friend. One evening in August, after your friend, 'the stranger,' as we all knew him, had made all preparations to take his departure for the East that night, an assassin fired on him from that bit of shrubbery out there and he fell. He never spoke again. His body lies in the churchyard on the hill. His murderer has confessed the crime, and is now in prison awaiting trial for this and other crimes. His life will doubtless pay the penalty."

The old man was deeply moved at the recital and asked many questions concerning the murder and

the causes that led up to it.

Jean told him all about the stranger's visit, his actions and ways, and also that the dead man's valise and its contents were held by the county of-

ficials at the county seat.

Mr. Gordon, at Jean's invitation, spent the night with him, and, as he was much fatigued by his journey, retired early, Jean having promised to accompany him to the county seat the following morning. Jean remained up to hear the returns from the election.

Late in the night there was a call. Jean answered it.

"Is that you, Jean?" called Frank Jackson.

"Yes, Frank. Come in."

"It's getting too late; I must be getting home. I'm elected, old boy, by a large majority, and so are all the boys."

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"Good for you all, Frank. This is the greatest day the Bald-knob country ever had. If it could only have come before all these murders were committed."

"They had to come, Jean, to awake our people to what was going on. I am thankful it is over."

"Yes, Frank; we should all be thankful that our

land is once more free."

The next morning Mr. Gordon, accompanied by Jean, visited the stranger's grave, and drove from there to the county seat, where Mr. Gordon went to

see Bud Jones in his cell.

Bud was a changed man. All his old bravado was gone. He was grasping at every straw of hope that pointed toward escape from the gallows. When the gray-haired man told Bud who he was the prisoner began to plead: "Mr. Gordon, I don't want to be hung. I will tell you all, and I pray you to intercede with the judge for my life."

The man did not reply, and Bud told the story of his crimes. "It was a mistake, Mr. Gordon," he concluded; "a great mistake. I thought it was

Jean Carroll."

"Then you intended to murder, did you?"

"Yes; but not your friend."

"All honest men are my friends," and Mr. Gor-

don turned away.

Jean went with him to the officials, and he soon convinced them he was what he claimed to be, a friend of the murdered stranger, and the valise with its contents was given to him. He at once ex-

amined the contents, but there was nothing found that gave any light as to what the stranger had done.

"When they left the court house Mr. Gordon said: "Mr. Carroll, walk with me to the hotel; I

wish to talk to you awhile."

When the hotel was reached he said: "Mr. Carroll, I find everywhere evidence of your fidelity and kindness to my lamented friend. Now I wish you to allow me to pay you for your trouble and expense."

"Mr. Gordon, you misunderstand what I have done. What I did, I did as a friend. You forget that he was killed in my stead. To accept pay for

my kindness would be selling my friendship."

"I appreciate your position, but here is a small sum of money that he left behind. He has no known relative to whom this can go; will you ac-

cept it?"

"If, like myself, he has no relatives, would it not be well to use this money to erect a stone at his grave? I had intended to erect a simple stone, but, if you wish, this money could be used in this way."

"That is certainly a good plan, and as I will leave to-night on my way to the East I will ask you to see that a suitable stone is erected; to do this

much more for our mutual friend."

"I will gladly do it, Mr. Gordon. Have you any preference as to what inscription shall be placed on the stone?"

"I will leave that to you. Here is the name and you may finish the inscription." Mr. Gordon

handed to Jean a neat card on which were the

words: "George Grevoise, Mineralogist."

"George Grevoise! Do you know that was the name of my only living relative? He was last heard of in Philadelphia when a boy many years ago. He lived in Virginia before that time."

"Our friend lived in Virginia before coming to Philadelphia, where he worked his way through

school."

For several minutes Jean was silent, as though he could scarcely believe that his departed friend was indeed his long-lost relative. When he spoke his attitude was as one addressing an unseen person: "The stranger, my friend, my cousin; but the ties that bound me to you could not have been stronger had I known our relationship, for there is

no closer tie between men than friendship."

"Mr. Carroll," Mr. Gordon addressed Jean, "since the stranger we both loved has proven to be a relative as well as a friend of yours, I feel that I ought to tell you why he was here as he was. George Grevoise was a fine mineralogist, and was sent here to find a vein of mineral that he believed existed. His instructions were to keep his mission secret. In his only letter from here he wrote: 'I have found it. The deposit is greater than I expected. Will start home at once.' The location of this deposit was his secret; it died with him. It may be of use to you. It has cost us too dearly in his death to tempt us to try to find it again."

Jean did not reply. He did not tell him that they were together when the vein was found. He pre-

ferred the unbroken forest to all the wealth the

mines could bring.

That evening Mr. Gordon took the stage for Springfield and home to relate to his companions the story of their dead friend and the lost vein in the Ozarks.

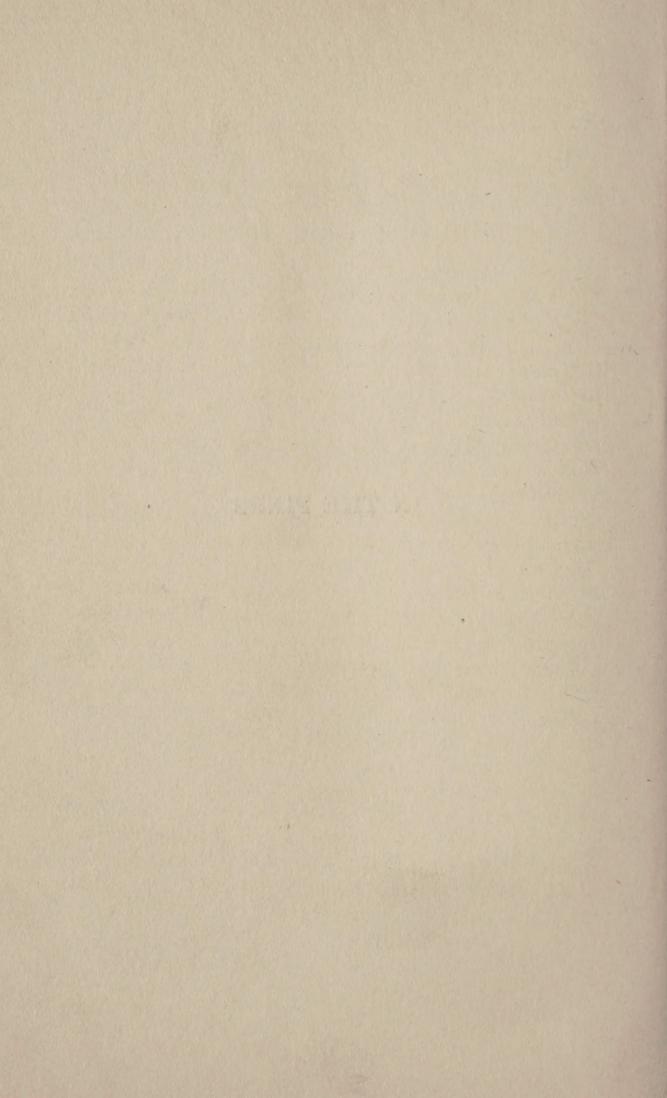
At once Jean had erected a simple marble shaft at the stranger's grave. The inscription read:

THE STRANGER,

GEORGE GREVOISE.

By his death his friend lives.

IN THE PINES



CHAPTER XXXVI

IN THE PINES

TOWARD the middle of November, when the gold was coming into the leaves and the wild grape hung ripe and luscious on the vines, there was a double wedding at the Dean home in the Ozarks. All the countryside was invited to the wedding supper, and when Jean Carroll and Ula Dean, with Martin Rogers and Mollie Ming, stood before the aged minister, the big farmhouse was crowded to overflowing.

The supper continued until the wee small hours of the morning, the guests being served in the good old-fashioned way; the older members of the party at the first table and on down until all had eaten. Guests had come from far and near. There were friends and relatives from the old Virginia home, political friends of Jean's from the county seat, and college friends of Martin Rogers' from different places. It was almost day when the guests who

were leaving the farm departed.

Early in the day after the ceremony Mr. and Mrs. Martin Rogers departed for a month's visit in the East. Jean had asked Ula if she wished to go with them. She replied: "No; I feel as if I never wanted to leave these lovely hills again. I would like better to go out alone with you, where

we could live together the life we both love so well. I don't want to see the crowded cities. I would much prefer to stay here, if it suits you, Jean."

"What suits you, suits me," Jean replied, and

would say no more about a wedding trip.

When Ula and Jean had bidden the others goodby, as they drove away to take the train at Springfield, Jean said: "Ula, come with me to the barn-

yard."

At the gate stood Red Buck and Ula's sorrel pony, bridled and saddled ready for a journey, while beside them stood two pack horses fully equipped with tents, cooking utensils, blankets and provisions.

"Oh, Jean, what does it mean?" Ula exclaimed.

"It means, sweetheart, that we are going to spend our honeymoon just as you wished; you and I, away off alone with Nature."

Ula threw her arms around Jean's neck and kissed him. "You are so kind," she cried. "Can

we start to-day?"

"We are to start at once. Go and tell Papa and Mamma Dean good-by."

Ula turned to find her parents had followed them.

"Oh, do you know where we are going?"

"Yes, daughter," replied Mr. Dean. "Jean told us of his plans and we fully approve. Nothing will bring the roses back to your cheeks so soon as a month in the woods. I want you to spend a month together in the woods, like children at play, and when you come back to your future home you will be hearty and happy, while those who take a tire-

some journey will feel worn out and fretful. More divorces originate from long wedding journeys than

from any other one cause.'

Jean and Ula mounted their horses and rode away down the hill and across the river and into the heart of the wonderful Irish Wilderness, the pack horses following carefully behind.

Before sundown they found a beautiful spot beside a sparkling spring, the whole earth carpeted with myriads of needles from the majestic pines

that covered the hills for miles around.

"Oh, Jean, such a lovely place, why not stop here?"

"Here is where I selected as the spot for us to begin life together. Will it suit you, little sweetheart?"

"Oh, so well. It is so grand and beautiful and good. It seems that I have seen this place before."

"Stand over here. Now close your eyes." Jean walked a few steps away. "Now you may look."

For a moment she did not yet recognize the place, then she rushed to him, saying: "Oh, Jean, you great boy; you are so good to bring me to the spot where I first knew I loved you."

"And to the spot where I first knew it was you I loved. But we must not spend all our time recounting the past, the present is with us and the future

before us."

Jean quickly unpacked and unsaddled the horses and tethered them out to graze, unrolled and stretched the tent on a grassy knoll and made a fire to warm the toast. Ula, under his direction, had

gathered boughs for the tent floor, and soon all was snug for the night. They pulled their camp chairs up before the blazing pine-knot fire and their day's work was done.

A month later the camp was struck as suddenly

as it was pitched.

"Ula," said Jean, "we must go home now, our holiday is over."

"Oh, Jean, it is too bad to leave this lovely place.

I sometimes wish we might always live here."

"Don't talk that way, Ula; you don't know how you tempt me. You forget that a part of me belongs to this life, and it is hard enough for me to leave it. But I will leave it and try to forget my Indian nature if you will tell me one thing."

"I don't want you to forget your Indian nature, for it is what makes you different from other men, so strong, so true, so constant. Now what is that 'one thing' you want me to tell you, my Indian chief-

tain?"

"Tell me, Ula, have you enjoyed your stay in the pines?"

For an answer she placed her soft, white arms around his strong neck, and pulling his curly head down to her, whispered:

"Listen to the pines, my love. They are singing to me a song of love, peace, joy, and contentment.

What are they saying to you?"

Gathering her up in his great, strong arms, he said: "They sing to me of purity, peace and love forevermore!"

THE END [388]



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